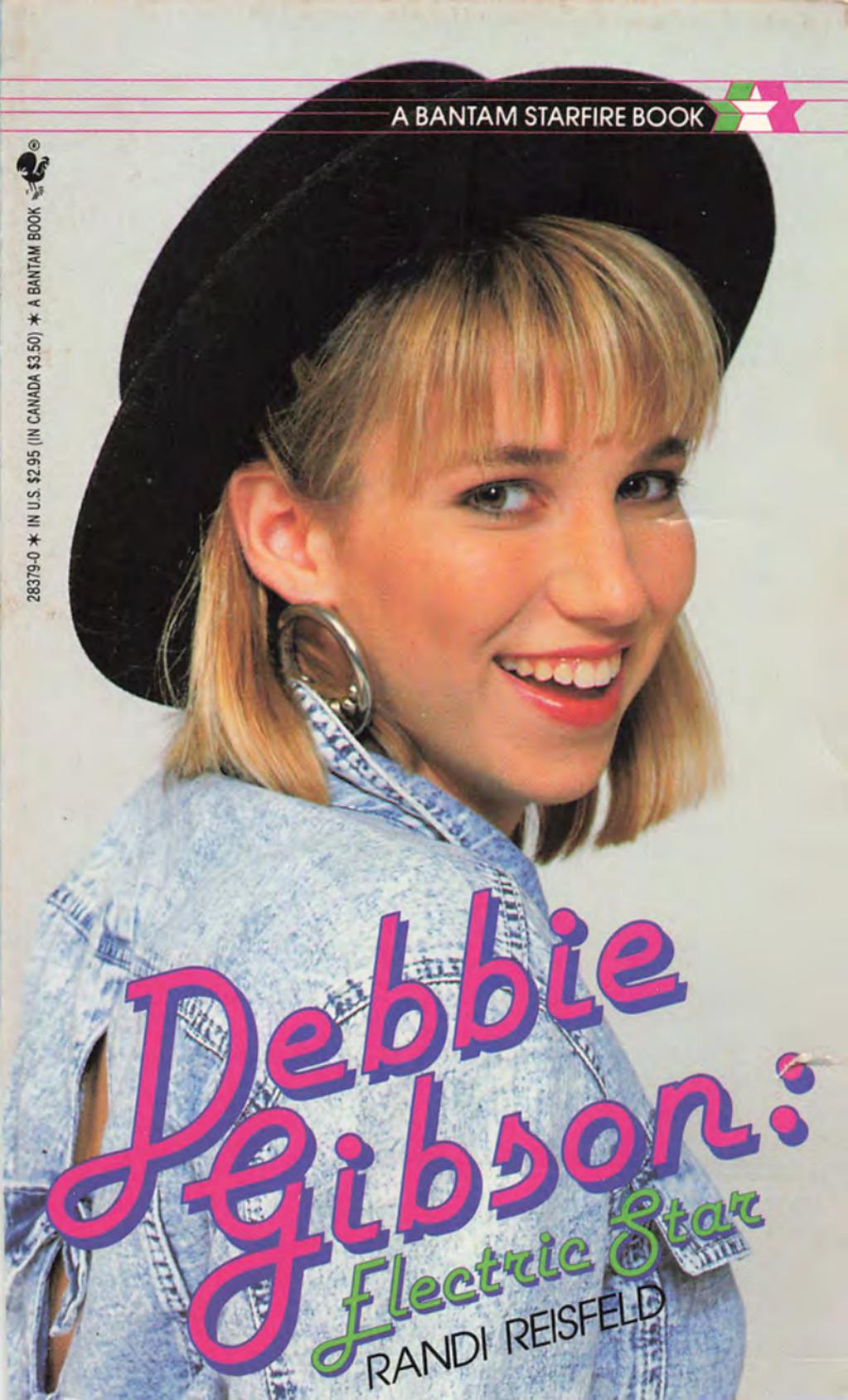


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A close-up, slightly angled photograph of Debbie Gibson. She has short, light-colored hair with bangs and is wearing a black cap. She is smiling broadly, showing her teeth. She is wearing a light blue denim jacket over a white shirt. The title text is overlaid on the lower left side of the jacket.

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*Electric Star*

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# **Debbie Gibson: Electric Star!**

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*For information address: Bantam Books.*

ISBN 0-553-28379-0

*Published simultaneously in the United States and Canada*

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PRINTED IN THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA

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## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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The author expresses her gratitude to:

Brian Bloom, Cecelia Brauer, Doug Breitbart, Dr. Ben Cuiffo, Dr. Ron Deck, Iris Eplan, Morton Estrin, Marilyn Fisher, Melissa Fogarty, Gary Gomels, Pam and Scott Grimes, Pat Hall, Estelle Hoffman, Mildred Hohner, Barry Lather, Jennifer Leff, Paula Lindstrom, Robert Marks, Melissa Nadler, Guen Omeron, Brian Robbins, David Salidor, Sandy Sandoval, Ina Wallman, Debbie and Wil Wheaton, Larry Yasgar, Jerry Zaback, and a few whose names will never see print.

Also, thanks to Beverly Horowitz for making it a "real deal," to Hedy End, Chris DiNapoli and the staff of *16* magazine for their support, to my family of friends (you know who you are) for their constant encouragement and advice, and to Mike Mandelbaum, the computer doctor.

Always, with love to M., S. & S.

And thank you, Debbie, for being who you are!



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# Introduction

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Debbie Gibson is the spitting image of the teen next door, as her blond ponytail bounces atop her head and her big denim jacket flops over her frayed-at-the-knees jeans. She's cute, not beautiful, open and accessible, not remote, more earthy than exotic.

Debbie is as clean-cut and refreshingly wholesome as a cool breeze that cuts through a hot summer's day. And she really *is* what she appears to be. She really *is* a bright-eyed, bubbly teenager who loves to shop for hot new clothes and bop around town in her too-cool convertible. Her room really *does*, as her mom good-naturedly complains, "look like a grenade exploded in it," and she really *can* talk on the phone for hours with her girlfriends. For all the world, she could be any one of the lookalike teen queens cruising the mall on a Saturday afternoon. Except, that is, for one tiny thing.

She's not exactly anonymous anymore, and she can't exactly *go* to the mall on Saturdays anymore: she'd be mobbed! For Debbie Gibson is a true-blue pop rock sensation, and every girl in America knows exactly who she is and what she looks like!

Debbie Gibson is not exactly your ordinary girl next door—everything about her is, and always has been, rather *extraordinary*. By the time her eighteenth birthday rolled around, she'd already recorded two smash albums, had eight

Top 10 hit singles, and sold over six million records. In the process, she'd set plenty of records, landing in the pop history books as the first female teenager to record, produce, and perform *two* Number 1 hits. Then she became first in her class to top the Hot 100 Albums chart *and* the Top Pop Singles chart at the same time.

She'd performed live on stages all over the world for thousands of feverish fans and played hostess on TV's *American Music Awards* for millions more. She'd been named national spokesperson for a famous line of cosmetics and even had a new perfume named after one of her songs.

The statistics are imposing, but they don't come close to telling the Debbie Gibson story. Hers is two stories. There's Debbie Gibson—the sweet, wholesome purveyor of pop tunes who breezed onto the music scene seemingly "out of the blue." And Deborah Gibson—the serious, driven classically trained musician who left no stone unturned in her quest for stardom. This is the story of both of them.

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# Chapter One

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## Piano Girl

Debbie Gibson was born to be a star. By the time she was two, she knew it; by the time she was five, her parents knew it, too. The third of Diane and Joe Gibson's four daughters, Deborah Ann was different right from the start. Born on August 31, 1970, the brown-eyed baby with the reddish-blond hair was unspoiled and sociable. She liked the laughter and closeness of her family. She was a real people person.

What set her apart from her older sisters, Karen and Michele, however, was her inborn love of, and quick ear for, music. Whenever the radio or stereo was on, little Debbie seemed to really come alive, clapping and twirling, keeping perfect time with the music all around her.

By her second birthday, Debbie was walking, talking, and even singing. She could express herself well enough to make her wishes known—and what little Debbie wished for was not a doll, nor a puppy, nor a tricycle: the barely-out-of-diapers toddler wanted a guitar.

While that request might've startled other parents, it didn't really daunt Diane or Joe Gibson. What's more, they even tried to fulfill it. But because Debbie's hands were just too tiny to handle the instrument, they bought her the next best thing—a child-size ukulele. Debbie took to it immediately, and it became her favorite toy.

Debbie's parents have always loved music, and each, once upon a time, secretly wished to make it a big part of their lives.

Debbie's mom, Diane Pustizzi, grew up in Brooklyn, New York, in the 1950s. Like so many girls of her generation, Diane used to listen to the radio and drool over the teen crooners of the day, whose sentimental love songs wafted over the airwaves. Her special favorite was Paul Anka, because he was close to her own age and sang about things she could relate to. Diane did not dream of a singing career for herself; she did, however, have a burning desire to learn to play the piano. Her parents, Al and Josephine, did not own a piano and reportedly weren't convinced Diane was really serious about wanting lessons. "I know you're not gonna practice" was a refrain Diane would often hear when the subject came up.

Although she wasn't to get her piano, Diane did not become angry or bitter. She understood and simply decided to defer her dream, determined, however, that one day she *would* have a piano. One day she *would* learn to play.

As she advanced through her teenage years, Diane thought she might go to college and become a teacher. She might well have gone and done just that—if love had not come along and happily interrupted her plans.

Joe Gibson had grown up in a decidedly different environment than Diane had—though not very far away. A boy with no family, the baby-faced youngster spent his early years in nearby Rockaway Park, Queens, New York, in the St. John's Home for Boys, a 150-year-old facility supported primarily in those days by the Catholic church. Joe's heritage was part Italian. He got his blond hair and fair complexion from the German side of his family.

Although Joe Gibson had few luxuries in his youth, he did have a gift for song and a love of music as strong as his future wife's. Ironically, Joe had even more of an opportunity to indulge in his passion. At twelve years old, the sweet-voiced youngster became part of a barbershop quartet—four boys

from the orphanage who dubbed themselves the Four Peanuts. With the help of the home's leader, the Four Peanuts polished their harmonies and began performing in front of audiences. Not quite professional singers, they did, however, earn some small success singing on TV's *Name that Tune*, at several Bob Hope USO tours, and even on *The Ed Sullivan Show*. For a time, it looked as if the Four Peanuts might have a real future as professional entertainers, but they never made it that far.

As each boy turned eighteen, the need to have a marketable skill and make a living was ever more pressing. Since they weren't truly related, the group disbanded. Each Peanut went his separate way, leaving the dream of musical success behind, a sweet, melodic, but increasingly distant memory.

Joe got a job at a nearby airport with a major international airline. It was a good job, offering security, opportunity for advancement into managerial ranks, and—as he'd eventually find most important—flexible hours. He could work nights and be available during the day. That flexibility would one day prove invaluable.

It wasn't long after Joe started working that he met Diane Pustizzi and fell in love. The young couple, who shared, among many other things, a profound love of music, knew instinctively they'd soon be married. And so they were—Diane was barely eighteen years old at the time; Joe not much more. The newlyweds settled in Brooklyn, not far from Diane's ecstatic parents. And, as was common back in 1965 for a young couple of their heritage and backgrounds, Diane and Joe began planning a family. They hoped for a large brood of their own and the very next year had their first child, a blond baby girl they called Karen. Diane and Joe, with their extended family close by, adapted well to parenthood. In fact, they reveled in it.

One of the most popular songs of the day was a lilting ballad by the Beatles called "Michelle." In the mid-and late 1960s, there were a lot of Michelles born—that was the name (minus

an *l*) the musically minded Gibsons gave to their second daughter, who arrived in 1968.

With Deborah's birth in 1970 it became clear that the Gibsons were outgrowing their Brooklyn apartment. They needed more space and dreamed of a home of their own. With three little girls, the Gibsons wanted a house in a family neighborhood, near good schools. After some thorough searching, they found exactly what they were looking for in the suburb of North Merrick, Long Island.

Along the tree-lined streets, young mothers pushed baby strollers past block after block of neat, well-kept homes with small patches of lawns. People walked their dogs, bunches of teenage girls strolled along the streets and giggled over the latest trend.

Diane and Joe bought a two-story frame house on an untrafficked dead-end street only one block long. Just five short blocks from the elementary school, the location was perfect; even more convenient, the high school's tennis courts and athletic fields sat at the very end of their street, with the main academic building just a stone's throw away. It was a modest house, similar in size and style to those around it, but it did have four bedrooms, a lovely bay window in front, a backyard perfect for a swing set, plus a two-car garage. It was an idyllic setting—Joe painted a hopscotch court in the driveway for his little girls. The Gibsons joined the local Catholic church and settled comfortably into their new neighborhood.

A piano was the very first piece of furniture the movers unloaded into the Gibsons' new house. Diane had decided that her time had come—she had her own home now and was finally going to learn to play, no matter what. Splurging on a piano might have seemed like an extravagance at the time—it turned out to be one of the most serendipitous things she ever did.

From the moment the piano arrived, the house was never

quiet—only that *wasn't* because Diane was pounding at the ivories. After all those years of wanting one and then finally having a piano at her fingertips, Diane Gibson never did learn to play the instrument. She couldn't even get close.

It was, instead, her little girls—first Karen, then Michele, and even little Debbie, not yet three years old, constantly dabbling at the keys. Without a second thought, Diane made up her mind to give her older girls what she'd never had—piano lessons. They took to the lessons like little fish to water. After school, Karen and Michele would come home and *want* to practice—they never had to be reminded. Even more amazing was baby sister Debbie, who would try to mimic the notes she heard her sisters playing. And she played each note, each beginner tune, perfectly—every time. It was obvious right from the start that Debbie had a gift. All the girls were talented, but clearly, Debbie had been blessed with something extra.

Soon, it wasn't just what her sisters had learned that Debbie found she could copy. One day she sat down at the piano and successfully played a song completely by ear that she'd heard on the radio. The tune was "Billy, Don't Be a Hero," the one hit of a folk rock group called Bo Donaldson and the Heywoods. Deborah Ann Gibson was only four years old.

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## Chapter Two

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### "I Want to Be a Superstar"

In August 1975, Debbie celebrated her fifth birthday by going out with her grandparents to dinner at her favorite restaurant. She recalls the event with relish. "We'd go there two times a year, once on Christmas and once on my birthday—it's become a family tradition." At the time, the restaurant had a policy that kids under twelve got a free dinner for their birthday. Little Debbie proceeded to order the biggest, most expensive lobster they had. When it came, Debbie polished off the entire thing all by herself. "I looked like this little fat thing when I walked out," she remembers. "Next time we went back, they had a special kids' menu. They wouldn't let the little kids order from the big menu anymore—and that was because of me!"

The lobster dinner isn't Debbie's only happy memory of her fifth year. That was the year she officially joined the "big sister" ranks, with the birth of dark-eyed Denise, the family's fourth and, as it turned out, final child. Debbie doted on her little sister; in many ways, she still does. All four Gibson girls, in fact, are extraordinarily close.

Debbie's fifth year also marked the start of her own formal piano lessons—and, of course, the start of her own formal education: kindergarten.

She must have felt just like a big girl as she got to walk the

five blocks to Camp Avenue Elementary School with the more experienced Karen and Michele.

Debbie's kindergarten classroom was spacious and well stocked with blocks, paints, trucks, books, even a little playhouse in the corner. What caught Debbie's eye right away, however, was the light wood upright piano next to the playhouse. "She loved to play that piano and sing," Debbie's very first teacher remembers. Mrs. Murray is a petite, pert, and vibrant woman, especially sensitive to the needs of her very young charges. She remembers Deborah Ann Gibson as an independent spirit who always knew what she wanted. Sometimes, Debbie didn't want to conform with the rest of the class!

"Each year at Easter, I'd have the children make bonnets," Mrs. Murray recalls. They used colored tissue paper to form a ring of flowers and would wear them in the school's Easter parade. But Debbie had her own ideas for an Easter bonnet! "She came in the next day wearing one she'd made at home, three times the size of the hats the class had made." Mrs. Murray exclaims. "And she'd pasted everything she could find on it—everything, it seemed, but the kitchen sink!"

That time, Debbie's creativity did not land her in good stead: she was told in no uncertain terms that she would *not* be wearing her creation in the school's parade.

When Debbie herself looks back on her kindergarten days, what she remembers most clearly is something else altogether: it was there she was inspired to write her very first song. Modestly, she says, "It was the kind of song you'd expect a five-year-old to write, if a five-year-old were writing songs." She means that it was simple—but the simple truth is that most five-year-olds are awfully busy just learning to write their *names*. They don't write songs.

Debbie's inspiration for the ditty was a little speech her teacher gave to the first graders every year. Mrs. Murray explains, "Their classroom was right next to the kindergarten, so they'd often line up right outside my door. Sometimes,

some of them would tease the new kindergartners, who were naturally scared in the beginning. They'd try to steer them into the wrong classroom." Debbie's ditty was called "Make Sure You Know Your Classroom."

She'd composed the simple tune on the piano and made up all the words herself. Her big sisters had to help her write them all down, for precocious though she was, at five years old, after all, Debbie didn't know how! She took her musical creation to school and sang it for her classmates, accompanying herself on the piano, every chance she got.

When the kindergarten day was done, the children were customarily picked up at the door by one of their parents. Since Joe Gibson worked nights sometimes, it was often he who had the opportunity to take Debbie home from school. Mrs. Murray remembers his standing outside her classroom door and remarking about his talented daughter, "She's going to make it big someday."

Even then, the Gibsons knew. With the little formal musical education they had, still they realized Debbie was a prodigy. She could pick up anything on the piano; she had a lovely voice and could carry a tune beautifully; and now, she was writing songs, too. Of course, way back then, Debbie couldn't articulate it, but there's no doubt that the dream was forming. And as time went by, it became very clear: the dream was really Debbie's own. Her parents saw the talent and the drive, but they never pushed her. They stopped at nothing, however, to help her make the dream come true.

Like her sisters, Debbie loved her piano lessons—threatening to cancel a lesson was her mom's way of making sure Debbie's room got cleaned!—and even at the tender age of six, or seven, or eight, she'd rush home from school to practice. "It's true," Debbie acknowledges, "I always loved my lessons, nobody had to twist my arm. I'd come home from school, and I'd do like two hours of classical and then two hours of popular music, until dinner time!" In fact, the one

thing she and her sisters did fight over was practice time at the piano. "It got so bad," Debbie says with a laugh, "that eventually, especially after Denise started, we had to get two pianos! Between the four of us, there was at least eight hours of practicing a day!"

Indeed, the Gibson household was a noisy one. If someone wasn't playing music, someone else was listening to the radio or stereo, or watching TV. The songs Debbie's sisters loved were by such popular teen artists as Shaun Cassidy, Andy Gibb, and the Beach Boys. Debbie herself went for Elton John (she loved his record "Crocodile Rock") and Olivia Newton-John. Debbie's favorite annual TV show, which she never missed from the age of five on, was the *Grammy Awards*.

But while her sisters were content to play the piano, Debbie was busy writing songs—and performing them. "I was always hammy," she admits. She was also always dedicated and—even at such a young age—truly driven. Music had become something she no longer simply *liked* to do; it was something the little girl *had* to do. And making up tunes came as naturally as breathing. Every family event was marked with an original song from Debbie. When the Gibsons adopted a dog—in part because there was someone at Joe's workplace who had one to give up and in part to help Denise get over her fear of dogs—Debbie wrote a song. "It was called 'My Puppy Grew,'" she reveals, "and it went something like, 'My puppy grew and grew / I didn't know what I should do!'" When the family went to visit relatives who lived on a farm, Debbie wrote about that. "They were silly songs," she feels now, but as she got older and began to learn and experience more things, her tunes got more sophisticated, too.

Debbie sang and played her songs at every opportunity she got. She didn't miss a chance.

She played flute in her elementary school band, she sang in the choir. She was in every school play and entered every school talent show, too—back in the early grades, she'd most

often sing "Tomorrow" from the popular play *Annie*. Sometimes, Debbie was asked to play the piano for other kids who were singing in the talent shows. She always obliged.

She entered, too, every competition she heard about. At school, she won a PTA award for music. Debbie was tickled—but in truth, even as a grade schooler, she was already an old hand at awards.

For back when she was only six, she entered her first real, outside-of-school talent contest. Competing against singers, dancers, and musicians, many of whom were already teenagers, little Deb took first place with her piano rendition of Beethoven's classic "Für Elise."

Those competitions were only the beginning. Debbie tried out for everything, entered every contest, auditioned for every singing part or even acting role imaginable. Debbie's talents, and self-proclaimed hamminess, extended beyond her music. Indeed, all four Gibson girls had a flair for acting. No one was thinking in professional terms, but Diane had begun getting her girls into a few local community theater productions. It was something the kids did on school holidays and sometimes summers, just for the fun of it.

For all that talent, dedication, and drive, however, it wasn't until Debbie got her first rock 'n' roll album, Billy Joel's *52nd Street*—and, soon after, saw her first rock concert (Billy Joel at Long Island's Nassau Coliseum)—that everything crystallized. Deborah Ann Gibson, nine years old, all at once knew exactly what she wanted to do with the rest of her life. Simply and succinctly, she uttered the magic words that would put her on course: "I want to be a superstar."

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## Chapter Three

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### Oh, Those Lessons

The Gibsons didn't have a lot of money. They had no showbiz savvy and fewer connections. But they did have a belief in their daughter so strong that—as long as Debbie wanted it—nothing was going to stop them from helping her reach success.

It began with lessons—of every sort imaginable. For Debbie didn't stop with piano lessons: she took speech lessons (to help soften her natural New York accent), dance lessons (including tap, modern, and jazz), acting, flute, and gymnastics lessons. Later on, she'd even add voice lessons to strengthen her sweet, but less-than-powerful, singing voice. Not all of the lessons Debbie needed could be found close to home. For some, she had to be driven to New York City, about an hour away. Since Debbie's sisters were also taking various lessons, the family budget was beginning to feel the strain. "Some weeks, we'd spend a hundred fifty dollars on lessons alone," Debbie says, remembering her mom's tallying.

Not wanting to deny her talented troop anything, Diane Gibson opted to help out with the expenses by taking an outside job. Every morning after getting the girls off to school, she'd travel over an hour to work as a secretary in a top surgeon's office in New York City. Diane worked for Dr. Mark Reiner, a compassionate man with whom she developed a

friendship. Many of Dr. Reiner's patients, as it turned out, were celebrities, and Diane was curious, on her daughter's behalf, about how these stars had gotten started. She felt that perhaps she could pick up valuable information for Debbie. Dr. Reiner was glad to help out where he could—and Diane did glean an occasional tip or two from her boss's patients.

In spite of all that, being a secretary was not a job Diane loved. Doing it only strengthened her resolve to help Debbie do what *she* loved.

"I was never happy at my job," Diane Gibson admits, "and that's a hell of a way to go through life. I'm a firm believer in, if there's any way you have a shot at doing what you love, you have to do it." She adds, quietly, "One way or another, I was going to help [Debbie] get there."

The getting there involved more than just expensive lessons. It meant going out on auditions. Along with her family, Debbie would scour the newspapers and neighborhood for notices of auditions. And she went out for everything—no matter where it took her.

"When she was in sixth grade," her teacher John Fried remembers, "she got a part in a regional production of the play *A Christmas Carol*." No matter that the region this production was in was all the way up in Connecticut—she'd arrange to leave school early in the day and make the long drive up into the neighboring state to do her role. Even if she came back late, she'd still have homework to do!

Debbie's community theater experiences weren't always so far away. Her native Long Island is home to many fine theater groups. One not too far from the Gibsons' home was called the Broadhollow Theatre. The company mainly produced plays for adults, but during holiday seasons, they put on shows children could enjoy and hired talented local kids to perform in them.

One season, they picked the play *Annie* to do and put out a casting call to fill the roles. Hundreds of talented kids auditioned, among them Debbie and Denise Gibson. The song

they had to sing for the try-out was one Debbie was well familiar with, "Tomorrow." Though neither girl won the plum lead role, they both landed supporting roles as Annie's orphan friends. Debbie's character was called July, while Denise played Kate.

"They were selected on their voices and stage presence," recalls producer Jerry Zaback. He adds, "Debbie was the perfect child to have in a show. She was nice, not spoiled, and took direction well." But what stands out most in Jerry's memory was the one thing Debbie did in her every spare moment at the Broadhollow. "She was always playing the piano, at every opportunity, noodling, playing, writing her own stuff."

During the five weeks Debbie appeared in *Annie*, she spent a lot of time at the theater. She had to—rehearsals started after school and sometimes ran as late as nine or ten at night. Performances were held Friday and Saturday nights, as well as Sunday afternoons.

When *Annie* ended its run, Debbie signed on for Broadhollow's next kids' production, as part of the cast of the ever-popular *Mickey Mouse & Friends*. Debbie enjoyed all of it. She was gaining valuable onstage experience—just the kind she knew she'd one day need.

Though she was starting to land acting gigs, Debbie was never content—she was always looking for the next opportunity. And she'd grab every one, whether or not it looked at all promising. "When I was little, even if I knew you had to have black hair for a show, I'd go for it anyway," Debbie says. "I knew that I didn't have an appointment for an audition, but I'd crash the audition and try to push my way in. I tried out for [the play] *Evita* when I was eight or nine—I didn't get the part, but I did get myself seen." And even at such a young age, Debbie understood the way the show-biz game is played—getting *seen* is important, for even if you don't get a role right

then, perhaps a casting director might keep you in mind for the next play.

Debbie also auditioned for the professional, Broadway production of *Annie* in New York City. She remembers, "My mom would say, 'You know you're too tall,' and I'd say, 'I know. I'm gonna wear baggy pants and I'm gonna bend my knees and I'm *going*.' And she'd say, 'Fine.' So we'd both go, I'd tell them I was four foot six instead of four eight, I'd bend my knees." Needless to say, Debbie's ploy did not work. As her mother predicted, she was turned away for being "too old and too tall" for the particular role, even though Debbie was of average height for her age.

Of course, Debbie was disappointed, but she wasn't totally depressed. She may have been momentarily down about not getting the parts she tried for, but she was never out. No, you never counted Debbie *out* for anything!

Around her tenth birthday, Debbie decided to try for something a bit more professional. Watching TV, she realized that she could probably do commercials as well as any of the kids up there on the screen. In order to break into TV ads, however, she'd need a professional manager. Getting one to represent her turned out to be easier than the Gibsons thought possible. For it turned out that *this* time, they had very good timing. Debbie had been taking tap and jazz dance lessons at the Phil Black Dance Studio in New York. Just at that time, Phil and his sister, Mary Menting, decided to open a talent management company—they called themselves Top Talent and invited their most promising dancers to become clients. Deborah Gibson, along with her three sisters, had found professional management.

At Top Talent, Debbie began the rounds of auditioning for commercials. Although she was just the right "type"—cute, bubbly, exceptionally bright and charming—she never did snare any jobs. A short time later, Mary Menting dissolved Top Talent, but she sent her most promising clients, Debbie

and her sisters included, to another manager, Maryann Leone, who ran Terrific Talent. Under Maryann's tutelage, Debbie went on countless *more* auditions. It would take two long years before Debbie landed even *one* commercial.

Another kid might have given up—each audition meant a long drive from Debbie's home into New York City and back—but Debbie Gibson had a strong ego and could take rejection. She once said, "I didn't need to be booking things [commercials] to feel successful. If I did a good audition, I felt good about it." She just never gave up her positive attitude. "I figured, it's all right, I'll go out on enough calls, and I'll start getting them."

The undaunted Deb did just that—after years of trying, within a few months, she landed in over ten TV commercials in a row, among them: Wendy's hamburgers, Mandee clothing stores, Commodore computers, Oxydol detergent, and *Reader's Digest* magazine.

Debbie's third manager, Paula Lindstrom of All American Talent, urged the young girl to start trying for TV and movie roles as well. "Even though I knew she was a talented singer and songwriter and really wanted to get her music heard, I advised her to get experience all over—so in the long run, she'd be able to do it all." It was good advice—and Debbie took it. She continued the endless rounds of auditions, and though she didn't land any significant roles in TV shows or movies, she *was* part of a crowd scene in the hit movie *Ghostbusters* and had a tiny role in *Sweet Liberty*.

The commercials and auditions were beginning to really take up a lot of Debbie's time. She never minded putting the hours in or had any trouble organizing her time—"I'd bring my [school] books on the train or in the car. . . . I just made sure I stayed on top of it," she states. But she *was* beginning to mind that all this running around was taking her further and further away from her first true love: making music. It got to the point where she had a decision to make. "When the acting

really started to take time away from my music, I decided to stop." She quit commercials, movie, and TV tryouts and became even more dedicated to her music. Along with her big sisters, she started on more advanced classical piano lessons with two very distinguished instructors.

Morton Estrin, a college music professor and private piano teacher with an extensive reputation on Long Island rarely took on beginners. He did, however, take on the Gibsons—Karen, Michele, Denise, and, Debbie.

"I taught Debbie piano, theory, and harmony," he says. "She was a child, but she was very, very talented." Emphatically, he adds, "She's talented enough to become a serious classical artist if she ever wanted to. Unlike a lot of today's pop artists, she's a perfectly literate musician."

When Mr. Estrin mentioned to Debbie that he'd taught piano to a fellow Long Islander named Billy Joel, she got very excited—she hadn't known that her very own piano teacher actually influenced her idol! Perhaps that's what encouraged her to tell Mr. Estrin that she, too, was writing songs and wanted to become a rock star. "She'd been telling me she was writing songs," he recalls, "so finally, one day I said, 'Okay, sing one.' She started to belt out what she'd done. And it was *so good*, I said, 'Oh, my God, I can't believe this kid!' She really had tremendous drive and energy. And she's very gifted. Personally, she's such lovely kid—such warmth, she's a doll!"

Those sentiments are echoed by Cecilia Brauer, a concert pianist who performed with symphony orchestras and did some private teaching, as well. Cecilia recollects, "Mrs. Gibson called me in August of 1981, and I interviewed the three children, Karen, Michele, and Debbie. I was doing very little teaching at the time because I was so busy with performances and rehearsals. I decided, however, to take the girls on because I admired the dedication and commitment of the parents."

At that point in her classical piano training, Debbie was playing Mozart sonatas—and it was clear early on to Cecilia that she was extremely talented. *And* enthusiastic—"She'd come in bubbling with ideas," Cecilia says. "Whenever Debbie composed a new song, she'd play it for me. She was bubbly, vibrant, and extremely musical. At one recital, she performed a Mozart sonata and a complicated piece by Debussy. She had talent galore, and even at such a young age, she had such style and personality—plus drive!"

With all the time and energy spent on developing Debbie's talent, her home and school life didn't suffer. For the Gibsons maintained what, for them, was a very normal, if busy, home life. They made sure to get away once a year for a family vacation (since Joe worked for an airline they traveled at a substantial discount) and enjoyed Mom and Grandma's home-made macaroni every Sunday without fail.

Music was an important thread in the Gibsons' family life, and as Cecilia Brauer points out, all the girls were involved. Karen and Michele got their share of musical recognition and often took home a trophy or two for their efforts.

But nowhere were the two, music and family, more connected than at church. The Gibsons were parishioners at the pretty, peaceful Sacred Heart Roman Catholic Church in North Merrick. All the girls were active in church productions. One year the church put on the play *The Sound of Music*, and the four Gibson girls were cast as the family in the play, the Von Trapps. Debbie, Karen, and Michele were also part of the church folk group. "They were a group of twenty-five kids," says leader Pat Hall. "They'd meet on Wednesday nights for rehearsals, then perform every Sunday at the ten-fifteen folk mass. They'd sing tunes from the play *Godspell*, like 'Day by Day,' and also more religious songs, like 'I Am the Resurrection and the Life' and 'City of God.' It was very popular." Debbie, she recalls, was one of the few kids who could play as well as sing. She played piano only occasionally—there, her

main instrument was guitar, which she played mostly by ear. "The group itself was really very good—relaxed but good," Pat Hall exclaims. "Still, Debbie really stood out. I mean, I could rely on her to run the group if the regular, adult piano player didn't show up."

Every once in a while, Deb's dad, Joe Gibson, would sing with the folk group, especially when adults were needed for the alto parts. "He had a really good voice," Pat says enthusiastically. "And what a nice man!" Although mom Diane didn't participate musically ("I can't sing a note, I confess," she once told a reporter), still she was there with her clan each and every week—church was truly a family affair.

Back at Camp Avenue Elementary School, Debbie remained a top student. Starting in fourth grade, she was bright enough to be accepted in her district's WINGS (Widening Interests through New Experiences for Gifted Students) program, an extra enrichment curriculum designed for academically gifted children. To make it, children had to have a high IQ, good grades, and the recommendation of their teachers. Debbie got in—as had Michele before her—with no problem. Of course, that meant more work, as WINGS students were required to do not only their regular assignments, but extra projects, as well. Debbie dove right in and distinguished herself as a model student.

Debbie was a popular girl at school, even though her budding success in commercials could easily have made the other kids jealous. Debbie learned early on how not to let that happen. "Aside from the fact that [doing commercials] made me much busier," she confides, "it really didn't change me much. . . . It was like, I didn't make a big deal of it, so no one else really did and I stayed the same. If I treat people the same, they treat me the same."

Debbie's health teacher, Mrs. Guercio, concurs. "Sure, she was a motivated child—nothing was going to stop her—but she had good values and she came from a nice family. She didn't

treat any of the other kids differently, and the others treated her just the same."

Debbie learned never to let success go to her head—and as she got more and more successful, that lesson became more and more important.

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## Chapter Four

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### Something Different

Debbie began her twelfth year by spending a lot more time on her songwriting. "That's when I began to write really seriously," she asserts. "No more silly songs." That was the year, too, she made a pretty incredible promise to herself: to have a recording contract with a major professional record label by the time she turned sixteen! She would think herself a "failure" if she didn't. Debbie's dreams have always been on a grand scale, but unlike so many who only daydream about making it, she was always out there, doing something to make it happen.

In pursuit of her goal, Debbie, along with her family and manager, looked for more opportunities for her to gain professional experience *and* get her music heard.

A popular showcase for young hopefuls is the TV show *Star Search*, on which would-be performers—actors, singers, dancers—are given a shot on national TV. Debbie wanted to be on it. "We sent her up to *Star Search* maybe three or four different times," relates manager Paula Lindstrom. "We had her up there promoting her own music, but she was never chosen for the show." That setback made Debbie even more determined to get on *Star Search*.

The Gibsons were aware that the Metropolitan Opera, one of the greatest opera houses in the world, had a children's chorus.

Diane Gibson had written to the opera company in hopes of arranging auditions for both Debbie and Denise. She'd received no response, but heard opportunity knocking when the girls' piano teacher, Cecilia Brauer, mentioned that *she* sometimes played the celeste in the orchestra there. Cecilia offered to put in a word for the two Gibson girls. Very soon after, they were able to audition, and both were accepted into the chorus.

Mildred Hohner was in charge of the children's chorus at the time, and she was very impressed. "Debbie was a soprano," she says, "and she was especially good. She could pick up the music and just sight read it off the page. I remember her as being a very nice, pleasant kid who was cooperative and talented."

As soon as they joined the chorus, the girls were taught the music to the opera *Hänsel und Gretel*, in which they sang the roles of gingerbread children. Debbie ended up staying with the Met (as it's called) for two years, during which time she learned to sing classical music in different languages and performed in the operas *La Bohème* and *Le Rossignol*. She worked with the best classical directors in the world, and as Mildred Hohner puts it, "she learned what excellence in performing means."

It was a heady two-year lesson. Debbie got a great deal out of it. She attributes her skill in videos and live performances to her days at the Met.

Rehearsals were often held at six P.M., one or two nights a week, and dress rehearsals were sometimes held during school hours. That meant someone had to be available to drive Debbie back and forth from home to the Upper West Side of Manhattan, where the Met is located. If Diane wasn't available to do the driving—she was working in Manhattan already—the task often fell to Joe Gibson. By this time, he'd made a conscious decision to make some career sacrifices for the family and deliberately transferred out of a management position at his job just so he could have more flexible hours. If

he was needed to drive Debbie—or any of the girls, for that matter—to a rehearsal, audition, lesson, or job—he could be there. Grandma and Grandpa Pustizzi were often on call, too, for driving duty: everyone helped out.

According to Mildred Hohner, Debbie might have done even more work with the children's chorus than she actually did, but she sometimes wasn't available. "She was very busy," Mrs. Hohner states.

One particular solo spot Mrs. Hohner did recommend Debbie for was something the young teen would have *made* time for, had she gotten it, for it was a chance to really step into the spotlight and shine. Mrs. Hohner recalls, "I'd heard that an opera company in Sarasota, Florida, was looking for a young girl to sing the major role of Flora in *The Turn of the Screw*. I only sent two girls from my entire chorus to audition. There was a girl by the name of Melissa Fogarty, and there was Deborah Gibson."

Melissa, now a student at the Eastman School of Music in Rochester, New York, remembers Debbie and their "dueling" auditions very well. "It was October 1982. I was thirteen, and Debbie was twelve. She had long light brown hair, long bangs, and she used to wear these patent leather shoes all the time. For the audition we had to sing the music from *The Turn of the Screw*. Believe me, it's an extremely difficult piece, and it was very prestigious to have been recommended for it." Melissa watched Debbie audition. She reports, "Debbie was asked if she knew the music, and she said, 'No, but I can sight sing it.' And she could, but somehow, I don't think that's what they wanted, or maybe she just didn't have the sound they were looking for." In the end, it was Melissa who got the role and spent five weeks in Florida performing it. Once again, Debbie tried and missed—but she never stopped trying.

Even though she was singing at the Met, Debbie didn't drop the idea of being discovered. And there were always new talent shows to be entered and new musical vistas to conquer. She

remembers, "I used to enter talent contests and stuff, and I'd sing Broadway songs, like 'New York, New York' or 'I Enjoy Being a Girl.' I didn't have to know the song beforehand. I'd just go to a music store, buy the sheet music, and sight read it."

One really important talent show that all four Gibson girls entered was held at New York City's World Trade Center. In order to really polish up their act, this time, the family decided to bring in a pro: they went to a vocal coach for some guidance.

Bob Marks, a conductor, arranger, and composer, as well as a vocal coach, had worked with many big stars in professional musical theater. "When the Gibsons came to see me, they were putting together a family act," he reminisces. "Each girl was doing a solo, and then, they were going to harmonize together. I helped with their musical arrangements, played the piano for them." Bob thought all the girls were talented, but no doubt about it, there was something different about that third Gibson girl. "Aside from having perfect pitch—like, if I asked her to sing an A, she could do it before I played it on the piano—Debbie had a sparkle about her, a brightness and energy that made her stand out."

Although Bob worked with the family only on that one occasion, he remembered Debbie when, a short time later, he became musical director for a brand new children's "nightclub." The place was called Something Different, and, indeed, it offered just that for New York City's sophisticated youngsters. Located on the city's Upper East Side, Something Different featured musical entertainment by talented show-biz kids between the ages of eight and sixteen. Their audience was similarly young, and the only food served was desserts. In fact, the performers themselves were often "paid" in ice cream sundaes.

Something Different opened in 1980 and was an immediate hit, not only with audiences—many kids would have their birthday parties there—but with the performers, as well. Its

reputation spread quickly, and soon, every kid in the New York show-biz scene wanted to perform there—from Broadway babes to commercial kids, minimodels, and TV tots: all who could sing wanted a shot to shine at Something Different.

Not just anyone who wanted to could perform there. Auditions were necessary with the club's owner, Patricia Young. Musical director Bob Marks thought Debbie Gibson would be just about perfect for Something Different and suggested she try out. Debbie didn't have to be cajoled. As soon as she heard about it, she went for it—and was turned down twice.

This time, however, she had Bob in her corner, and he went to bat for her. "I took a tape of Debbie's out to the car—it was the only place I could find a cassette player—and invited Patricia to sit with me and really listen to it. The song Debbie was singing was 'So Sweet the Music.' Pat loved it—that's what convinced her to let Debbie perform there."

Something Different's kids' showcase was open weekends only, and up to a dozen young singers would each get a chance at a solo. Bob played the piano and the role of emcee—one by one, he'd introduce the performers, telling the audience where each had appeared, in this commercial or in that movie. Debbie feels, "It was great for the audience because they would see kids from the movies or TV in person, so it was really fun for them."

Each got to sing a song, usually chosen for them by Bob. "Only you never just 'assigned' Deborah a song," Bob says with a laugh. "Unlike most of the other kids, she knew exactly what she wanted to do. Oh, she was very clear and very sure of herself." And what Deb wanted to do was truly something different: she didn't want to sing the standard "show tunes" the other kids were mostly doing. She wanted to do a medley by her favorite, Billy Joel, and she *also* wanted the opportunity to play and sing her original music.

"She was the only one in the show who was writing and

playing her own stuff," Bob acknowledges. "Her songs were simple, but she just kept improving." After her Billy Joel medley, Debbie might do an original. In those days, her songs had titles like "Rock 'n Roll Baby Doll," and "You Make Me Wanna Dance." "Debbie wasn't afraid of anything," Bob continues. "If she wanted to introduce a brand-new song of hers, she might come in with it Sunday morning and be ready to perform it that night. She was sure it would work out okay—even if I sometimes wasn't so sure!"

Debbie stood out from her Something Different peers in other ways—in a sense, she was really developing her own style, and a lot of what Debbie Gibson is today started way back then. While the other kids would simply sing their songs, Debbie used her hands and her whole body to really *perform* the song. And while all the Something Different kids were dressed alike—they all wore jeans and white sweatshirts that said "Young Stars" on them—Debbie made the outfit her own. "She'd add funky sneakers or a jacket," Bob says, "and, of course, a hat." That hat would later become a Gibson trademark.

Debbie also drew the distinct honor of dueting with Bob, the only performer called upon to do so. Together, they'd sit at the piano for the next-to-last number, and play and sing a lively tune called "Rinka Tinka Man." "We did it because she was good, just so good," says Bob, who recognized her talent. He notes, "When Debbie was taking her bow and getting her applause, I always said to the audience, 'You're gonna be hearing from this girl!'"

Some of the other Something Different graduates include actors Jonathan Ward (*Beans Baxter*) and Ricki Lake (*Cry-baby*). Holly Robinson (*21 Jump Street*) was a singing waitress. Debbie's chum from junior high school, Iris Eplan, was part of the Something Different crew, as was someone else who turned out to be a very special friend of young Debbie's, a redhead actor/singer named Scott Grimes.

"I was appearing in a Broadway show called *Nine* when someone told me about Something Different, and right away, I knew it was something I wanted to do. I loved singing, and it was good practice. Plus, it was, well—something different!" Scott exclaims. Only ten years old when he started, Scott sang "Somewhere over the Rainbow" from *The Wizard of Oz* for his audition. His sweet voice landed him at Something Different on the first tryout.

"One Sunday after I'd been there for about six months, I came in and I noticed this new girl. She was playing the piano and singing. Boy, was I impressed," Scott admits. "I mean, at that time, we were so young and all, I couldn't even comprehend how she could do those two things at the same time, let alone do them so well!"

Over their free ice cream sundaes and pecan pies (Deb's favorite) before each show, Scott and Debbie got to know one another. They'd talk about music and their hopes for the future: both had their hearts set on recording careers. Debbie confided that she was writing her own songs—in fact, she'd even written a song for Scott!

According to Scott, "One day she just said to me, 'I wrote this song. It's from a guy's point of view, and it's for you.' The song was called 'Lookin' for the Right Girl,' and it was about a guy who wants a girl he can talk to, someone he can go out with, without feeling shy. It was a real upbeat song," Scott continues, smiling, "and I thought it was incredible! Even looking back now, it was great for someone her age."

Scott never did sing 'Lookin' for the Right Girl' at Something Different, but their new musical bond drew Debbie and Scott closer. Scott admits, "I probably had a crush on her, I just admired her so much!" Nothing romantic developed, partly because of Scott's self-consciousness. He says, "She was tall for her age, and I was such a shrimp!"

But the friendship blossomed, and one day, the Gibsons invited Scott and his family to their home for a backyard

barbecue. As Joe Gibson and Scott's dad, Rick Grimes, flipped burgers on the backyard grill, Debbie proudly showed Scott around her house. "She had this drum machine," Scott recalls. "It was the first time I'd ever seen one, and we fooled around with it. She played Michael Jackson's 'Beat It' for me and some stuff she was working on. I asked her how many songs she'd actually written. I don't remember how many she said, but the number was way up there."

The number, in fact, was over one hundred.

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## Chapter Five

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### The Girl Most Likely

She wasn't voted Prettiest, or Most Popular, either. She didn't win for Best Personality, Best Dressed, Most Athletic, Cutest, or Funniest. According to her junior high school yearbook, Debbie Gibson wasn't even picked as The Girl Most Likely to Succeed. And when she asked for one of her songs to be printed in the yearbook, faculty advisor Gary Gomels turned her down. "I told her we couldn't feature the work of just one student," he recounts now, regretfully. But if the Brookside Junior High School yearbook had had a category for "Busiest," Debbie Gibson would have won hands down!

She entered Brookside Junior High School in the fall of 1982 as a seventh grader. This new school was too far from home to walk to, so Deb had to be carpooled along with other neighborhood kids. The school, was, however, situated right off the parkway—an easy hop, skip, and jump into New York City, where much of Debbie's after-school life took place.

In spite of the fact that she was away a lot, Debbie was popular. She's always had a close bunch of friends, and many of her closest friendships began back in junior high. Iris Eplan, who sang with her at Something Different, went to Brookside—the girls met in the cafeteria and became best friends. They still are today. In fact, Iris now performs as one of Debbie's backup singers!

At school, Debbie took a full course load—English, social

studies, math, science, gym, and Spanish, along with industrial arts, health, art, and music. She entered the school's own gifted program and followed an advanced curriculum. Dr. Ronald Deck, the program's coordinator, remembers. "The kids in that program were expected to do six days' worth of work in four—plus handle outside, individual projects. Debbie did all her work, she was a good student. Of course, she had to ask for extensions here and there, but she was such a hard worker and always made honor roll, that there was never a problem."

It helped that the school itself was very understanding of Debbie's hectic schedule—they'd cooperate by arranging her program so she could have a study hall at the end of her day so she could leave early for an audition or rehearsal.

Debbie actually managed to combine some of the outside projects required for her gifted classes with her music: often, her "project" was a new song she'd written. "It was appropriate for the English course she was taking," Dr. Deck felt, "so it worked out well." Besides, by this time, even Debbie's teachers were excited about her budding career. "Her parents would always invite us to come see her perform, if she was in a play or community theater or singing somewhere," says former teacher John Fried. "I remember the whole class went to see her in [the community theater production of] *Annie*, and it was really special."

But just because Debbie had one foot in the world of a professional show-biz career didn't mean she felt she was too good to put the other in school productions. She was part of Brookside's chorus and participated with enthusiasm in all school concerts. According to Dr. Deck, "You never had to ask Debbie twice to get involved, whether it was to play the piano for someone else, or to sing something on her own. Other kids were shier, you'd have to practically beg them, but not Debbie. She was a real go-getter. She'd always say, 'Great. I'll get right to it!'"

As much as she could, Debbie involved herself in other school activities. In ninth grade, she was on the student council and participated vigorously in fund-raisers. One year, the chorus had to sell oranges and grapefruits to raise money for the group to sing in an exchange program with students from New Hampshire. Debbie sold that citrus to everyone she knew—even to vocal coach Bob Marks! “I remember her dad dragging this bushel of oranges into the city for me and even helping me load them in the car,” Bob says, laughing. “Debbie had talked me into buying them!”

Was Debbie *ever* mischievous? “In truth,” recalls Dr. Deck, “she was always involved in something and didn’t really have time to get into trouble!” But if she was generally obedient in class, she did let her hair down on field trips. “Once a year, we’d go on an overnight,” Dr. Deck continues. “We’d go to Washington, D.C., or someplace, and on those trips, she’d let herself go. She wasn’t really bad, but let’s just say she was a lot noisier than I thought she should have been—she’d drive me nuts! She was so *social*. But back in class, she was so quiet that I used to wonder if this was the same kid!”

On top of her schoolwork and extracurricular activities, Debbie never let up on her music—creating it, singing it, and trying to get it heard. For her confirmation, she got a Casio synthesizer, and she made it the centerpiece of her first simple at-home recording studio. Debbie could not stop at simply composing new tunes. “When I’d sit at the piano and play,” she reveals, “I’d always be thinking in terms of other instruments and which arrangements would sound right.” Then, she’d want to record the song as she heard it in her head. Of course, since she didn’t have an entire band in her basement, she had to use the synthesizer (which provides a drumbeat and bass line) to get the “finished” version she wanted on tape. Well, as close as she could get it at the time, anyway!

It was during those early teen years, working hard in her homemade “studio,” that Debbie first wrote two of the songs

that would be smash hits later. "I wrote 'Only in My Dreams' at thirteen and 'Shake Your Love' at fourteen," she told *Spin* magazine. She recorded them, too. "I'd set up four tape recorders and play the drum beat into one, the bass line into another, keyboards and vocals into the others. Then I'd play them back the way I wanted."

Such a laborious system took hours and hours—but that's the way Debbie spent most days after school, if she wasn't busy in New York.

Debbie knew that more important than recording her demo tapes was getting them heard by someone at a record company. Since she had no contacts in the music industry, she looked up record company addresses in the Manhattan phone book and began sending the companies her homemade tapes. "I remember sitting at my kitchen table, putting my tapes and pictures into envelopes, sending them to record companies. I was like twelve years old, and they didn't know what to do with me!" Debbie explained.

Debbie's unsolicited mailings never did get her anything, except for lots of letters of rejection. But she kept plugging away, banging at doors, as she called it. "If you keep at it long enough," she reasoned, "one has to open for you."

She continued to enter contests, every one she heard about. They weren't all for songwriting, either. "Debbie was one of those kids who'd, like, listen to the radio, and when they had those contests where you had to name every song they'd played in the last hour, she'd do it and win all the records," a friend confides.

One particular radio contest that really proved worthwhile winning was brought to her attention by Dr. Deck from school. As he tells it, "One day in 1983, I came across an ad from radio station WOR in New York. They were sponsoring a songwriting contest to commemorate the one hundredth anniversary of the signing of the U.S. Constitution. The contest was open to anyone in junior high or high school, and I opened

it up to my gifted students. First prize was one thousand dollars plus some type of recording deal."

That was all Debbie had to hear—she headed home to write a song. It didn't take long, and the song Debbie came up with, "I Come from America" was a bouncy, upbeat number. In the four-verse ditty, Debbie, singing with a slightly foreign accent, tells about people coming from all over the world, speaking different languages (a few lines in the song are done in French, German, and Spanish), but making America their home. The rhymes were simple, but the tune, catchy and clever, showed real talent. What made "I Come from America" so special, however, was that Debbie, on her Casio keyboard, recorded all the "instruments" and all the background "oohs and aahs" all by herself.

When she was ready, she contacted a family friend, Sandy Sandoval, who ran a sound studio in New York. Debbie had often gone there, where Sandy, after hours and out of friendship, would work with the budding artist. This time, however, Debbie was extra excited. "She basically did the song by herself," according to Sandy. "I just worked with her on the vocals." With Sandy's help, Debbie had a finished tape—only she couldn't submit it to the radio station quite yet. There was one small hitch.

As it turned out, Debbie was also using that song as her final class project. She had to have Dr. Deck listen to it and grade it first: only *then* could it go to the radio station. The contest deadline was nearing; the Gibsons got in gear. Just as soon as Dr. Deck was done, Joe Gibson rushed to school, took the tape, and drove it down to the radio station.

Debbie Gibson, only twelve years old and pitted against high school seniors, judged by a panel from the Manhattan School of Music, took *first* prize. She'd won the thousand dollars, and though the recording contract that went with it didn't quite pan out (it was a Canadian recording contract), Debbie couldn't have been more thrilled. She played her prize

tape for anyone who'd listen—her piano teachers, vocal coach, friends, and extended family alike. She even got to perform it, thanks to the contacts of Sandy Sandoval, on a local TV program called *The Joe Franklin Show*.

Debbie knew exactly what she was going to do with her prize money. She used it, plus some of her earnings from commercials, to upgrade her at-home studio. She invested in a multitrack mixing board with three keyboards and began outfitting herself with other equipment she'd be needing. Debbie felt her breakthrough was near.

Teacher Ron Deck says, "Of all the kids I've ever known, Debbie was the only one I really believed was going to be a success. She was really dedicated, she really worked at it. Besides all that, she was just a plain super kid!"

Diane and Joe Gibson were understandably just as thrilled for her, but began to have other concerns on their minds. Clearly, Debbie's talent was growing with each passing day. And as Debbie recalls, "My parents were starting to think, 'Hey, maybe we really have something here.'" They'd been approached by people who said they were going to get Debbie's songs published. The Gibsons had innocently signed agreements they *thought* were fair and legitimate. But when it came to actually protecting their daughter's songs by copyrighting them, they went in search of a professional to advise them.

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## Chapter Six

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### The Education of Deborah Ann Gibson

Doug Breitbart was a young attorney who specialized in entertainment law. A native New Yorker who'd gathered extensive experience in the music business, Doug was someone Paula Lindstrom often referred her clients to for matters legal. When the Gibsons came to her for a recommendation, she immediately thought of Doug. He started by looking very closely at the publishing agreements the family had already signed. It didn't take him long to figure out that they weren't the best deals possible. It took him even less time to straighten out the whole tangled legal mess.

The Gibsons were grateful, but more importantly, they were *impressed*. Doug had original concepts about artistic integrity and approached each project he took on with a master game plan. The Gibsons were convinced Doug Breitbart could do a lot more for Debbie than decipher documents and copyright songs. They wanted him to be her manager.

It seemed like a wonderful idea—to everyone but Doug. Originally, he had no interest in managing Debbie, whom he'd once described as a "knock-kneed prepubescent who played a little Casio keyboard and sang into a little mono cassette recorder."

"I was reticent about taking this on," Doug admits. "I just felt it would be too much like a carnival move to promote a twelve-year-old as a pop artist." That didn't mean he didn't like Debbie's music, just that he didn't want to get involved with someone so young. But Diane Gibson, like her daughter Debbie, didn't give up easily. When she became absolutely convinced that Doug was their man, she tried hard to persuade him to join the Gibson team. Debbie sent him her tapes to listen to. She recalls, "He would hear a tape of mine and say, 'Yeah, but what's one tape?' Finally, I got him to realize I was making a tape a week!"

It took six months, but gradually, Doug changed his mind. He'd known right from the start that Debbie had talent. He needed to find out if he could help her develop it. He remembers, "I said, 'Okay, Diane, your daughter is a diamond in the rough. She's self-motivated, let's find out *how* self-motivated.'" Doug knew there was a lot of work ahead. He honestly felt Debbie's music was really good and catchy—but experience and instinct told him that no record company was going to sign her. The songs were just too juvenile. But once he decided he would get involved, Doug began to formulate a plan. He felt that maybe he could, after all, help make this girl a pop star.

His one condition upon taking Debbie on was that the family be willing to do it *his* way. And his way was going to take time.

He told the Gibsons that under his tutelage, Debbie was to do no "business," that is, shop no tapes around to record companies, until she was sixteen years old, no matter what. His reason was simple: she needed seasoning. She had the raw materials, but she needed training, especially if she wanted to continue to write, arrange, and produce her own songs. Her talent needed to be finely tuned, nurtured, and schooled; she needed a strong musical foundation to assure her of that long career she wanted.

But there was another reason Doug wanted Debbie to wait before turning pro. "She needed time to physically mature so she could *sound* like an adult," Doug explains. "She needed to be accepted in an adult music market, otherwise she'd just be a novelty. And neither I nor Debbie wanted people to think of her as a cute novelty act."

With the family's enthusiastic approval, Doug Breitbart became Debbie's new manager—and her formal music-biz education began.

No one needed to teach Debbie how to write songs—she'd been doing *that* since kindergarten—but there was a lot to learn about putting those songs on tape and creating hit records. Most pop singers rely on professional producers, arrangers, and sound engineers to contribute their expertise and come up with a finished product. Doug aimed to put Debbie in touch with the best—not so they could do it for her, but so she could learn one day to do it all on her own. "I wanted to give Debbie the tools she needed to grow as an artist, give her the data, the means to make her own musical statement," Doug says. For it was always his feeling that the songwriter—not some producer or technician—should be able to control the way the music sounds as a finished record. He wanted Debbie to have the skills to protect her creative vision.

He started by suggesting the Gibsons convert half of their two-car garage into a "modern" recording studio and add all the state-of-the-art equipment professional musicians use. It was an expensive proposition—but the Gibsons were determined. They pulled out all the stops. Debbie still had some earnings from the commercials she'd done. She also took an after-school job giving piano lessons. The family had to find a backer, someone who believed in Debbie enough to lend the needed cash. Diane had a cousin in New Jersey who—once he understood that he was actually financing Debbie's training program—came up with the funds.

The money was used not only to pay the pros who'd be

teaching Debbie, but to purchase real recording studio equipment. The day it all came, Doug says, laughing, "Debbie had Christmas in July—seventy-five hundred dollars of electronics landed in her lap!" Debbie had to learn to get over any fears she might have had about learning to operate such sophisticated equipment. As Doug puts it, "She had to rise to the challenge and get fluid on it." He had no doubt that she would. "I truly felt that as Debbie got older, using the studio would be second nature and she'd be translating all her experiences automatically into songs!"

In a short time, the conversion was complete. "We had to empty the garage and put all our stuff in the backyard shed," Debbie said. Debbie gave her new studio a name: she called it Root Beer Rag Studios, after a Billy Joel song. As promised, Doug brought in a team of pros to teach Debbie, and she dutifully soaked it all up. She learned how the experts produce records, how they arrange the instrumentation and add the layers of background vocals, how to work a big, digital, multipanel sound board.

But when the songwriters and lyricists came in to fine-tune Debbie's songs, she—politely, of course—turned a deaf ear. "I couldn't stand to be told a 'but' should go here, instead of a 'when.' I don't think anyone should be taught how to write lyrics," Debbie told reporter Rick Firstman. She stood firm for what she believed in and, she divulged later on, "I never, like, changed a thing!"

Aside from learning the technical tricks of the trade, Doug felt Debbie needed work in other really vital areas. He thought dance lessons would be helpful for the stage and video work that would come later. Most important, however, was her voice, which needed extra-special training. Debbie could certainly *sing*—well enough to perform operas in different languages—but that wasn't the same as belting out a rock song. For that, a different kind of training was required.

Doug enlisted voice coach Guen Omeron, herself a film and

opera singer, who immediately put Debbie to work. Guen used a method she personally developed over a twenty-year period. Guen's method involved strengthening the muscle that supports the diaphragm. "It gives you the strength to sing a whole phrase without fading out or going flat," Guen explains, and accomplishing that takes at least two years. "Debbie had a young girl's voice," Guen continues. "She needed the range to really belt out those songs."

When Debbie first arrived at Guen's midtown studio, she didn't know what to expect. Certainly, she couldn't have expected Guen to greet her with these words: "Here's the way the body works—get down on the floor, and let's start exercising!" It sure didn't sound like it had anything to do with voice training. But that was only the first lesson. When Debbie returned, Guen taught her to work out with weights—ten-pounders that were placed around her waist as Debbie sang notes and held them until her breath ran out. In time, dumbbells were added to the regime, and the weights got heavier.

Debbie endured the rigorous voice training program. She showed up faithfully at Guen's, twice a week for two years, "sick or well, tired or not," Guen says admiringly. "And Debbie was absolutely intelligent—she really understood what the training was all about. Not many people do." Guen was teaching Debbie stamina for those live concerts she'd one day be doing—plus helping her learn to protect against the throat problems that singers face.

Debbie's ability to handle her voice lessons along with all the other training impressed Doug Breitbart, whose belief in his young charge was growing stronger by the day. "Whatever I threw at her, it was unbelievable, she took it all. I really gained tremendous respect for her," he acknowledges.

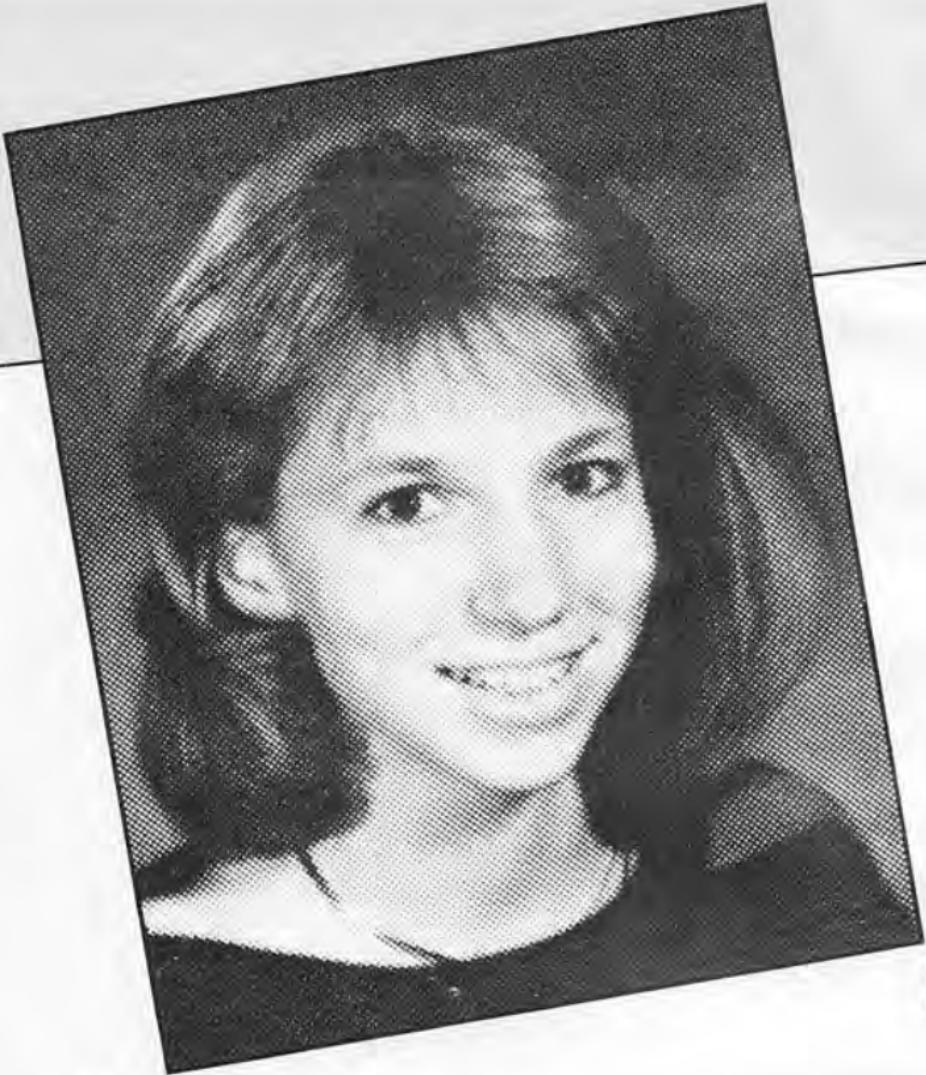
Doug also taught Debbie about the business side of the music world, about publishing and contracts and marketing. For that, Debbie remains grateful. "He gave me a lot of knowledge on the business side of things, but kind of left the

# *Debbie Gibson: Electric Star*



**D**ebbie first tried to break into show business as an actress. Here's how she looked at the age of twelve, when she landed her first commercial.

PHOTO COURTESY OF PAULA LINDSTROM/ALL AMERICAN TALENT



**B**rookside Junior High's graduating ninth grader Deborah Gibson worked extra hard to keep up her grades and her budding career. She was part of her school's academically accelerated gifted program and often used her original songs for school projects.

PHOTO COURTESY OF GARY GOMELS

# *Debbie Gibson: Electric Star*



**B**ecause Debbie was out of school so much going on auditions and working on her music, she didn't have much time for after-school clubs or sports. But her one extracurricular activity in junior high was the student council.

PHOTO COURTESY OF GARY GOMELS



New Year's Eve 1987 found Debbie performing at New York City's 4D nightclub. She had to lip-sync her songs while a musical track played behind her. She didn't like it, but she would do anything to make her first song, "Only in My Dreams," a hit, and performing in nightclubs was one way to do it.

PHOTO BY R. J. CAPAK/LONDON FEATURES, INT.

# *Debbie Gibson: Electric Star*

**J**oe and Diane Gibson, Debbie's parents, sacrificed a lot to help make Debbie a star. The family is very close.

PHOTO BY ROBIN PLATZER





D

ebbie's older sister

Michele designs many of her stage outfits, like this black-and-white number. Oldest sis Karen has worked the sound engineering at Debbie's concerts.

PHOTO BY JANET MACOSKA



# *Debbie Gibson: Electric Star*

**M**eeting her idol, Billy Joel, was a definite highlight of Debbie's life. Debbie credits fellow Long Islander Billy with being her musical inspiration and dreams of doing a duet with him.

PHOTO BY KEVIN MAZUR/LONDON FEATURES, INT.



**T**ommy Williams is Debbie's lead guitarist and co-musical director for her live shows. She's known him since she was nine and they acted together in a church play. Debbie laughs about how as kids, they didn't like each other.

PHOTO BY JANET MACOSKA



**D**ebbie's sisters are (left to right) Michele, Denise, and Karen. Karen has landed a great job at Debbie's record company working with new artists, Michele goes to Vassar College, and Denise is a high school student who loves tennis.

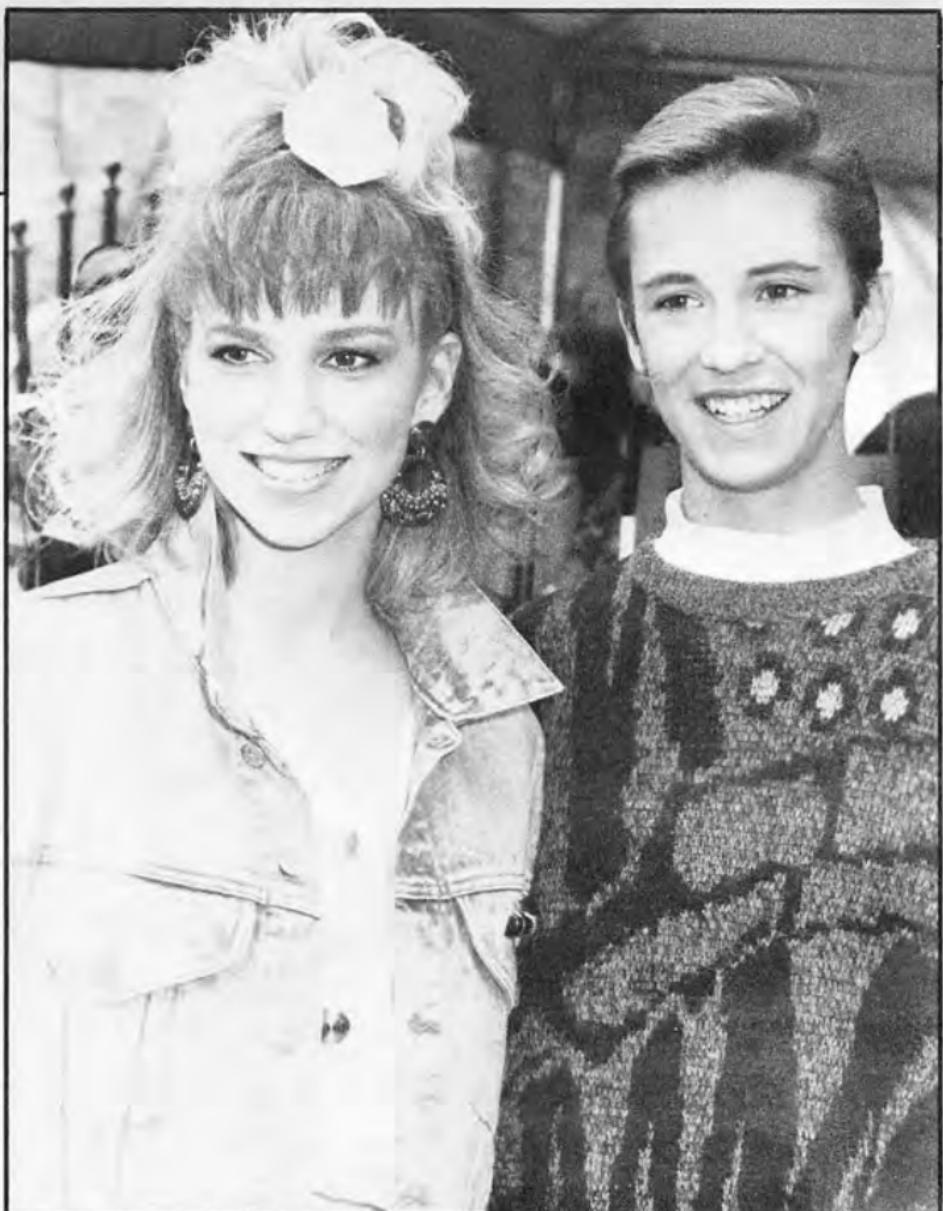
PHOTO BY ROBIN PLATZER

# Debbie Gibson: Electric Star



**Y**um! It hasn't all been a piece of cake, but the taste of success is oh-so-sweet, especially when she's tasting it at a fabulous, celebrity-studded eighteenth birthday bash in her honor!

PHOTO BY STEVE GRANITZ/CELEBRITY PHOTO



*A*ctor Wil Wheaton's been a special friend across the miles.

PHOTO BY JOHN PASCHAL/CELEBRITY PHOTOS

# Debbie Gibson: Electric Star



Dancing the night away with Brian Bloom is something Debbie didn't get to do very often, though she would have liked to. Debbie had a major crush on blue-eyed Brian, but now, they're just good friends.

PHOTO BY ROBIN PLATZER



The press often has them at odds, but Debbie and Tiffany really *like* each other. Debbie feels that her success as a teen singer paved the way for Tiffany's.

PHOTO BY KEVIN MAZUR/LONDON FEATURES, INT.

# Debbie Gibson: Electric Star



Creative Debbie's painting a mural on the wall of her bedroom in her posh Long Island house. The family had to move after too many fans discovered their first house and the Gibsons lost all their privacy.

PHOTO BY KEVIN MAZUR/LONDON FEATURES, INT.



D ebbie gets a kick out of signing autographs, especially on one of her albums. She's a fan herself and understands how important it can be to get an autograph from a star.

PHOTO BY STEVE GRANITZ/RETNA, LTD.

# *Debbie Gibson: Electric Star*

**A**t the New York Music Awards, 1989, Debbie scooped up four, but didn't forget it was her best friend's birthday — she brought her along that night and gave her a great present, too.

PHOTO BY DAVE LEWIS/LONDON FEATURES, INT.

**F**riends had advised Debbie to brush back her bangs if she wanted to look a little older, so she tried that, plus a soft body wave.

PHOTO BY NICK ELGAR/  
LONDON FEATURES, INT.



# Debbie Gibson: Electric Star



*A*s Debbie heads into her twenties, she looks forward to her first starring role in a major motion picture and another pop rock LP!

PHOTO BY KEVIN MAZUR/LONDON FEATURES, INT.

music up to me, which was great. And I learned from every experience, good or bad," Debbie told *Billboard* magazine.

While Debbie was, in effect, going to music school under manager Doug's watchful eye, she was *also* going to public high school. She entered Sanford H. Calhoun High School in September 1985. Physically, the move to the sprawling, multilevel, orange brick building couldn't have been easier: the high school was practically in Debbie's backyard. Her street, in fact, ended at one of the school's fields—a mere hop, skip, and a jump over the fence, and Deb could be in her first-period class. And at this point in her hectic life, every minute saved came in handy.

Calhoun High is the kind of suburban neighborhood school where groups of students congregate by the various exit doors, where kids take off for the local pizza parlor during lunch hour, and where the sports teams of all kinds—along with their cheerleaders—are revered. Although Debbie could not be involved in athletics and was not part of the school's "most popular" crowd, she did have her own increasingly tight-knit group of friends. Some she'd known since junior high, but others—like Jennifer Leff, Melissa Nadler, Ron Luperello, and Buddy Casimano—she met in high school. These were the people who understood the time and effort she was investing in her career, the ones who knew how hard and for how long she'd been working toward her musical goal. And in her senior year, when she did at long last grab the golden ring of recording fame, Debbie would have no trouble separating her true friends from the pretenders.

Admittedly, Debbie spent a good amount of time out of school—especially in her junior and senior years—but ever diligent, she did do her schoolwork. She joined the tennis team and the Calhoun High School choir. She entered the school's yearly talent shows enthusiastically, too, with high hopes of winning. She remembers being particularly chagrined when in her sophomore year, she lost. "I sang a song I wrote called

'Somebody Loves You,' " Debbie relates, "and I came in third! I was beaten by the football team, who all got together and did a rap song—they came in first. Then two dancers came in second—one of them was Buddy, who dances with me now. I was seriously beaten!"

High school principal Dr. Ben Cuffo remembers Debbie's being consoled by the talent show's coordinator, who told her, "Don't worry, Debbie. You lost this one, but you'll make it someday."

Not that losing her school's talent show was that big of a deal, but sometimes it seemed to Debbie that for every tiny victory, there was another setback. Just as she seemed to be making real progress toward her goal, something would happen to force a step backward. *Les Misérables*, a musical tragedy based on the classic Victor Hugo novel, had been performed in England and was about to open on New York's Broadway. Debbie, familiar with the play, felt she'd be perfect for the part of the young, martyred heroine Eponine. She determined to try out—it would be a chance to act and sing in a play that was bound to be the hit of the season. She spent weeks getting ready for her audition. When it came, she went in with all the spirit and confidence she could muster. She wanted the part badly.

Although she did give a beautiful audition and was called back on five occasions, in the end, Debbie lost out for being too young. "They gave the part to a legal eighteen-year-old," Debbie reasons, someone who wouldn't have to have a guardian or tutor on the set.

But perhaps what disappointed Debbie even more than that turn down was the fact that the TV show *Star Search* still wouldn't give her a tumble. For Debbie, at fifteen years old, had resolved to try that route again. This time, she had manager Doug's considerable contacts behind her. Diane Gibson felt that *Star Search* was a wonderful showcase for Debbie's talents. It would give her a chance to perform her

music on television; it was good experience and good exposure any way you looked at it.

For her part, Debbie wanted to get on that show more than anything. Entering contests was second nature to her at this point, and to her mind, *Star Search* was one of the grandest.

Maralyn Fisher was the *Star Search* talent coordinator at the time. In that capacity, she'd seen and heard more teen vocalists than most record company executives. And in her opinion, Debbie Gibson was fabulous, way beyond anyone else her age. "I listened to a demo tape of her original songs," Maralyn recounts, "and I was blown away. I thought, 'She is going to be a star.'" Maralyn contacted Doug, and Debbie came to audition in person. Her performance didn't dim Maralyn's opinion of the budding star: "She came in with her mother, and she performed a couple of songs. It wasn't just her voice, but the total package, the fact that she was writing her songs and that her image was appealing. She had great presence, she was a natural."

Maralyn did not have final say about who actually got to be on the show. She submitted Debbie's audition tape to the producers, with her own strong recommendation, but Debbie was not selected. "*Star Search*," Maralyn explains, "had a limited number of spots each season, and they needed a variety of talents. I guess the producers didn't see her as significantly different from the other talent that had already been booked for the show."

Disappointed, but not completely down, Debbie asked if there was anything she could do to change the producers' minds. She came back with all new material, but still to no avail. "She was really plugging," Maralyn felt. "It seemed to be a dream of hers to get on this show. And she was willing to do whatever had to be done."

If there was perhaps one small problem with Debbie's performance that Maralyn noted, it was that the sweet teen had a slight lisp, a bit of a problem pronouncing words with the

letter *S* in them. "Thank you for pointing it out," Maralyn was told by Doug, "We don't want anything to stand in the way of her success." The lisp was corrected but even so—Debbie never did make it onto *Star Search*.

In English class back at Calhoun High, Debbie had to read the book *What Makes Sammy Run?*—a story about unbridled ambition. The book became Debbie's favorite. "I guess it reminded me of me," Debbie admits. Debbie's mom, so staunchly behind her daughter, once confessed to one of Debbie's teachers, "I don't know if I could face the negative aspects of this business, being turned down for so many things!"

Debbie responds simply, "I don't give up easily!"

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## Chapter Seven

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### Out of the Blue

While Debbie was doing double duty, plugging away at both of her educations, Doug was similarly working his end of the business. According to Maralyn Fisher, who'd kept in close contact, "Doug was doing it brilliantly. He had a plan, every step of the way. He was a marketing genius." Doug's aim was to snare a recording contract for Debbie, to make that dream of hers—and, now, his—come true. And as Debbie often reminded him, she wasn't getting any younger: her sixteenth birthday was getting closer every day. Debbie had not forgotten the goal she'd set for herself so many years back: she was more determined than ever to reach it. She felt, as she candidly told *Long Island Newsday*, "It was my job to keep pushing, pushing, pushing. If I basically said, let's take our time, who knows? I may not have had a record out until I was twenty!"

Though he made no promises, Doug was, in fact, doing everything in his power to meet Debbie's sixteenth birthday deadline. He had his finger on the pulse of the music business and, when the time was right, knew exactly whom to approach with Debbie's demos. Doug had been having great success with dance artists at Atlantic Records, one of the biggest established record companies. He had a special working relationship with the senior vice president of singles and dance

sales there, Larry Yasgar. The two had worked together and helped make hits of songs by artists Nu Shooz and Regina.

Doug had recently set Debbie up with a new young producer and engineer—the particular demo tape that emerged from that session was the one Doug wanted Larry to hear. In his position at Atlantic, Larry heard a lot of tapes, for would-be rockers from all over sent him cassettes in hopes of being discovered and signed. Most were rather “run of the mill,” Larry explains, but he always had an ear out for something new. Larry was always busy, and initially he wasn’t particularly enthusiastic about listening to Debbie’s songs.

But Doug bugged him—and kept on bugging him. And finally, Larry listened. His first response was, “So?” He wasn’t impressed. When Debbie found out, she knew exactly what to do. She ditched the tape by the outside producer and made a new one, all by herself, with five new songs. According to Doug, “It was so good, it blew away the tape made with outside help!”

Again, Doug approached Larry Yasgar. This time he said, “Larry, these songs are written, produced, arranged, and sequenced by Debbie.” Larry’s answer was *still* not encouraging—mainly because of Debbie’s age. He said, “Well, these songs are *interesting*, but again. . . .” He could appreciate what Debbie had done, but he felt her songs were just too sweet and saccharine, or as Doug put it, “just too dippity doo!”

One afternoon, just before Debbie’s sixteenth birthday, Doug, Diane, and Debbie were sitting at a small table in a neighborhood restaurant in New York with Debbie feeling blue. Her birthday was approaching, the one she’d set as her recording contract goal, and she was not even close to reaching that goal. She turned to Doug. “You said when I turn sixteen, I get my contract.” Doug knew exactly what to say to her.

“They’re telling me your songs are just too young, too juvenile, Debbie.” She was hurt, and retorted, “You want me

to write older, like a seventeen-year-old!" Doug gently rebutted, "Exactly. If you know what I'm looking for, do it."

Deborah Gibson never turned away from a challenge in her entire life. She wasn't about to now. Less than two weeks after that meeting, she delivered exactly what Doug had asked her for, a brand-new eight-song tape that he unabashedly describes as "a smash!" He ran to Larry Yasgar's office with it. Larry looked at Doug and said, "Gibson, Gibson. You're bothering me with Gibson again!" But he agreed to listen one more time.

It took the busy exec two weeks until he found the time, even though Doug would call every day and ask if he'd heard it yet. Then, one evening driving home, he put the tape on his car cassette player—and this time, something clicked. He had to admit that the songs *were* real good, real cute. Larry began to think in terms of the music that was currently out and suddenly realized that at the time, there really was nothing by a teenager on the market at all. He began to see the big picture, as Doug already had—if he could get Debbie Gibson signed and she was a big hit, they could be the leaders of a whole new trend. This teenager could be the hot new thing!

There was only one slight catch. Larry Yasgar, important as he was at Atlantic Records, didn't have final say over who gets signed to the label. That was his boss Doug Morris's job. As Larry remembers it, his final say—the first time Larry approached him, *and* the second—was NO! According to Larry, Doug Morris felt that releasing an unproven song, by a sixteen-year-old no less, was not a good idea financially.

But Larry knew that if he *really* pushed hard enough, he and his boss could come to an agreement. The third time he approached Doug Morris, Larry said, "I want to do this. I really believe we have something here."

Debbie was advised that record company execs held meetings on Tuesday afternoons to decide which, if any, new artists would be added to their label. "So every Tuesday," she confides, "I'd tell all my friends, 'At twelve o'clock, drop to

your knees and pray for me.' " And each Tuesday, after school, she'd come home hopeful for news of the one magical phone call that would change her life.

Finally, one magnificent autumn afternoon in 1986, Debbie did come home to the news she'd been praying for. Doug Breitbart was on the phone. And he said, "Guess what—you're a recording artist!" Atlantic Records *would* take a chance on her. To Doug, Debbie just said, "Oh, wow," but the minute she put down the phone, she started to scream. "Yes!" she yelled, jumping into the air. "Yes!" She admits gleefully, "When I get excited, I literally jump up and down."

The call had come one month after her sixteenth birthday—she'd done it after all.

It did not occur to Debbie that the road ahead would be rocky. The entire Gibson clan, Grandma and Grandpa, too, went out to the East Bay Diner, a family favorite, to celebrate. Debbie called all her friends to tell them the good news. She even showed up at Guen Omeron's studio with a balloon bouquet, to say thanks.

When she went to Atlantic Records' office at New York's Rockefeller Center to meet Larry Yasgar, Debbie was impressed by all the LP covers by hit artists on his wall. Shyly, she said to Larry, "Gee, I hope my record jacket gets up there one day." Larry said only, "We'll see." For if Debbie and her family hadn't yet realized it, *he* knew that the toughest battle was still to come.

The deal Debbie got at Atlantic Records was a tentative one—they'd indeed signed up young Debbie Gibson, but *only* for one record, a twelve-inch single aimed only at the dance market. In Doug's expert opinion, it was the only way she would've been signed at all. He explained at the time, "Even though she was a pop artist from day one, there was a wide open dance marketplace, and it was the most expedient way for an artist to get in the game."

But Debbie knew—she never had a lapse of confidence—

that getting in the game was all she really needed. She knew her dance record was going to be a big hit and once it was, the record company would extend her contract for an entire album. She knew it was going to happen that way, for that was Doug's master plan, but she also realized that serious work lay ahead.

It was make-or-break time for Debbie, and this time, it was for real. She needed to record, professionally now, three songs, one as *the* single and two more if she were called upon to perform in the dance clubs where her record would most likely be played. As good as her at-home studio was, she wouldn't be making her record there. With a small advance from Atlantic Records, Doug was able to hire Fred Zarr, a top-flight producer who'd engineered an LP by Madonna. Fred's studio was in Brooklyn: the Gibsons headed in the direction of Debbie's birthplace.

Working with Fred proved a rewarding experience on both ends. After getting to know Debbie, he realized, "She's extraordinary to work with, she really knows what she's doing!"

Doug and Larry thought that "Only in My Dreams," written when Debbie was only thirteen, was the best bet to start with. Debbie, who had final approval on everything, agreed. They picked "Shake Your Love" and "Fallen Angel" as the other two. And they got to work. But unlike Debbie's other projects, this one couldn't be done after school, or on the weekends. She had to take time off from her school days to make "Only in My Dreams." It was vital that this one be perfect—it was from this, she hoped, that an entire career would spring.

"Only in My Dreams" was released by Atlantic Records at the very end of 1986—and it took a sharp nosedive to nowhere almost immediately. It was being played, on a limited basis, in dance clubs around the country, but it wasn't making waves and it certainly hadn't begun to turn up on the all-important record popularity charts. For this record to make it, it looked like the girl was going to have to go out on the road and sell it

herself. That meant appearing live at those dance clubs, performing to prerecorded tracks of her songs. Though she wouldn't have a backup band, Doug did want his young freshman to go out with two dancers, to prove that Debbie could really put on a show.

Nevertheless, it wasn't a tour Debbie particularly relished. For one thing, the kinds of clubs she'd be performing in were mainly for adults—she'd be too young to even get in if she weren't performing. For another, she wasn't thrilled about merely lip-syncing her songs as the tracks played behind her.

But she went anyway. She realized, "It was so important that people could see me perform." Besides, she'd have done just about anything to make "Only in My Dreams" a hit. So, the entire first half of 1987 Debbie spent each and every weekend performing in clubs all over the country. Her travels would take her from her hometown all the way to California, with many pit stops in between. On the West Coast, Debbie took the opportunity to contact an old friend. Her buddy from her Something Different days, Scott Grimes, had moved there with his family, to star in a television series. When the Grimes family first moved, Debbie had made sock dolls as a going away gift, but she hadn't seen Scott since then. Her club tour was her first chance to get reacquainted in person. Scott's family invited Debbie and her folks to their Los Angeles home for a barbecue, California style, complete with hot dogs *and* hot tubs. It was a relaxing good time that went a long way toward keeping their friendship alive. Scott and Debbie are close to this day.

Although that was a sunny stop on her mini-club tour, most of the other places she found herself were not so comfortable for the clean-cut teen from the suburbs. But Debbie gamely went along with the plan. And it seemed to be working. Reaction to her in the clubs was positive, even if her show was a lot different from the kinds of acts that usually performed there. But the sophisticated patrons "respected her," according

to Doug. "She really held her own." More importantly, interest in the record was definitely on the rise—but more effort would be required to make "Only in My Dreams" the hit Debbie needed it to be. A massive effort, in fact, was needed, and it ended up involving Larry and his staff at Atlantic, plus every single one of Debbie's relatives, friends, and even casual family acquaintances. Larry Yasgar and his team had started the ball rolling by mailing the record to radio stations and record stores all over the country. They'd call each one to ask, "Did you listen to it? Did you play it on the radio? What are your thoughts?" Larry's team hounded the deejays—that's how a record by a new artist gets enough airplay so listeners can decide if they like it or not.

The Gibsons geared up and went to work on their end. They gave Doug a formidable mailing list of just about *everyone* they knew. All were recruited to do three simple things: buy the record, tell their friends to buy the record, and call the radio stations to request the record. Family members went as far as "walking" the record into clubs and asking deejays to play it. Debbie even gave several copies to her good friend Melissa, who was off on a Florida vacation. Melissa reports, "Debbie said, 'Take a few of them with you. Bring them to the clubs and radio stations down there. Be my ghost army.'" Melissa was only too happy to oblige. Debbie's dad even composed a letter that he sent to his coworkers at the airline. In part it read, "My daughter is Debbie Gibson and we need your help. . . ." Joe Gibson personally stuffed that letter into two thousand mailboxes of his fellow TWA employees. Further, he gave a coworker two thousand copies to distribute in another part of the country. Debbie herself manned the phones to deejays all over. In Doug's description, "It was a real grass-roots effort."

The all-out assault worked! By the summer of 1987, "Only in My Dreams" not only was a dance club hit, it had made it onto the Top 40 pop charts, as well. Rock radio stations all

over the country were playing it. Dutifully, Debbie and her clan would listen each day to every possible radio station within earshot that *might* be playing "Only in My Dreams." Debbie would come home from school and flip on the radio and the phone answering machine—her mom might have called from work to say "Such and such a station played it today!" Looking back in an interview with the USA Network, Debbie laughed. "It was in very light rotation—like [they'd play it] once every ten hours! But we'd listen constantly." Debbie giddily remembers the first time she heard it on the car radio. "We were driving home from Manhattan, and it was so thrilling, my dad almost drove off the road!"

Once the record "happened," there was much more to do: a video *and* an entire album to be recorded. For just as Doug had told Debbie, once she'd gotten her foot in the dance door, the rest surely did follow: she was awarded an album contract. The album would have to be done quickly, because no one wanted to lose the momentum Debbie was gaining. It would mean more time out from school, but Debbie was determined to keep up with her schoolwork somehow *and* put out one dynamite album at the same time. She did just that.

Choosing the ten tunes to be included on the album was not an easy task—prodigious Debbie had so many to pick from. Once again, the choices were determined by Doug, Larry, and—most especially—Debbie. She recalls, "In picking ten tracks for the record, it basically came down to choosing the ones I wanted to produce, or coproduce." Debbie's reasoning was simple: "Nobody knows a song better than the person who wrote it," and since she was the writer, she wanted to be the producer as well. But because this was her very first album, she got the chance to do that only on a couple of cuts. It was decided to keep most of the tracks in a dance-oriented mode, but all the songs Debbie decided on were, nevertheless, love songs.

Debbie and Fred Zarr went to work. Musicians, backup

singers, and a host of technical people were hired to get the sounds down just right. A special favorite was "Out of the Blue," which became the album's title. Debbie lent a producing hand on that and the snappy "Staying Together," as well as the haunting "Fallen Angel." All by herself, Debbie got to produce the album's only real ballad, "Foolish Beat." She didn't know then that she'd make history with that song.

Other songs picked for *Out of the Blue* were "Wake Up to Love," "Play the Field," "Between the Lines," "Red Hot," "Shake Your Love," and the song that had made it all happen, "Only in My Dreams."

At the same time Debbie was singing her heart out and laying down the tracks for her first album, she was also getting ready for her first formal photo session. Now that she was an official pop pro, she needed publicity shots *and*, even more important, something truly awesome to go on the cover of her album.

From the start, there were differences of opinion on how Debbie should look. There was the record company's opinion, that she needed to look a lot older and more sophisticated than her sixteen years to sell records; and there was Debbie's desire. She wanted her photos to look like *her*, "someone who wears jeans and T-shirts." Although she understood the record company's thinking at the time that if people saw how young she was, they might not want to listen to the record, she didn't agree with it. Debbie had an instinctive understanding of the rock scene, and she felt it would be just plain good business for her to look her age. "I believed," she explains, "well, the [music] market's in need of something, like, *not* so glamorous now, and that's what I *am*, so why not go for that?" Her thinking made good sense, but the picture flap did not go her way. In her first publicity photos, she was made up to look a lot older and more glamorous than she really was. Debbie says of the photos, "They weren't bad, but obviously I didn't like them."

By the time she was ready to do the *Out of the Blue* album cover itself, the climate had changed. Working with professional stylists didn't suit her, so Debbie went shopping for some trendier, teenage threads and got to wear what she wanted, a striped black-and-white top and ripped jeans. The makeup artist on the set suggested painting a face on Debbie's knee—she agreed to try it and liked the way it came out. The *Out of the Blue* album cover also pictures a cuddly white teddy bear lying on its ear next to her, showing that the young teen hadn't completely "grown up" and left all childish things behind.

In the end, Debbie refused to dwell on the picture contretemps. Sagely, she acknowledges, "I was just grateful for the fact that I had an LP out with all my own songs." For when all was said and done, that was what she'd always wanted, and once it happened, nothing could dim this girl's delight.

*Out of the Blue* debuted August 3, 1987, and Debbie's excitement was shared not only by the rock press, who called her "one of the most exciting young performers of pop music," but also by the record-buying public. Debbie's fans were snatching up her album like hot cakes!

In all, five singles were released from *Out of the Blue*, four of which, the title tune included, went Top 5 on the national pop charts. But it was the plaintive ballad "Foolish Beat" that set a record. In June 1988, it hit Number 1, and that made Deborah Ann Gibson officially "the youngest artist in chart history to have written, produced, and performed a Number 1 song."

When that happened, even wordsmith Debbie had no words to describe the overwhelming joy she felt at that incredible accomplishment. As for her *Out of the Blue* album, it sold over three million copies and was certified multiplatinum by the Recording Industry Association of America.

Debbie Gibson, pop star, had officially arrived—even if it wasn't exactly "out of the blue."

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## Chapter Eight

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# Songwriting—Doin' What Comes Naturally

"I eat, I sleep, I write a song." That's Debbie's deft description of how it's done. For her, composing the melodies and lyrics that make up an original tune is as natural as breathing. By her sixteenth birthday, Debbie had written over three hundred songs. By her own candid appraisal, not every one is worthy of recording, but as Debbie once declared on a radio broadcast, "I have enough songs for my next thirty albums!"

Since she started, way back in Mrs. Murray's kindergarten class with that simple ditty "Make Sure You Know Your Classroom," Debbie's songs have grown up along with her. Though they're not always *about* her, they often reflect what's on her mind. She's written songs about her puppy ("My Puppy Grew") and about puppy love ("Only in My Dreams"); she's written songs about her love for her country ("I Come from America") and about her love for her generation ("Electric Youth"). Of course, *most* of the songs that pour from Debbie's pen—the music's composed on the piano, she uses spiral-bound notebooks to write down the words—do tend to revolve around the same subject: boys. Make that, Boys-with-a-capital-B, and everything that goes with them: discovering

them, yearning for the one who doesn't know you're alive, sweet romance, breaking up, making up, shaking up, waking up to love, finding love, losing love, and, feeling helplessly, or even "lost," in love.

Just how much of those lovely, lyrical love songs come from personal experience? That's a question Debbie's had to answer time and again. With the passing of time, her answers, always honest, have changed. For these days, more and more of what she writes does come from honestly having lived those experiences. "Out of the Blue," she's said, is about a boy named Anthony. She'd known him since kindergarten, and never felt anything special for him. Suddenly, when they were both teenagers, their feelings changed and they began dating. Their relationship turned out to be short-lived, but the song is about discovering unexpected feelings for someone.

Debbie's also strongly hinted that "Lost in Your Eyes" was written for the actor Brian Bloom, whom Debbie dated and who has mesmerizingly blue eyes.

Most of her hits so far were written when she was younger and spring from the experiences of others, coupled with Debbie's own fertile imagination. As she once explained, "I think everyone *knows* of different experiences. It's just a matter of putting them into words and trying to make something of it. So that's just kinda what I'm doing. I just kinda observe everything that goes on." She's quick to acknowledge that "having two older sisters helps! I just absorb everything that goes on around me—from TV, from the movies, from friends, and, especially, from my sisters!"

A good friend, Melissa Nadler, observes that Debbie was always thinking in terms of songs. "She'd say to us, 'Tell me your problems so maybe I can write about them.' Or she'd say, 'Did you think of any good lines so I can write a song?'" Another close friend, Iris Eplan, agrees: "Like if we happened to be talking about something, Debbie might suddenly say, 'That sounds like a song!' She was always thinking along those

lines." Melissa *thinks*, but she's not sure, that Debbie's "Wake Up to Love" might have described her feelings for a boy who was too much of a friend to become a boyfriend.

Debbie herself points to a song she wrote called "Love Started Again" as being about her sister Karen's high school boyfriend. Debbie told reporter Rick Firstman, "My sister had, like, a serious boyfriend, and they kept breaking up and getting back together and breaking up and getting back together. And I went, 'This is just like a soap opera. It would make a great song!'"

Sometimes a flip phrase tossed off at home may inspire a new song. "Play the Field," from the *Out of the Blue* LP, came about, Debbie reveals, because "it was always a thing my mom said, not like in a bad way, just that when my sister was going out with that same person for five years, [my mom] would say, 'It's good to date, to go out with different guys. You're young.' So I got the idea from that. I wrote that song when I was fourteen—people would say, 'What does a fourteen-year-old know about playing the field? But it's just, y'know, a lot of it is imagination.'" Sometimes Debbie imagines being an actress, and her songs evolve after she's created the two characters the song is about. Then, she takes the "part" of the girl.

"Foolish Beat," Debbie's first Number 1 song, was her creative imagination at its best. "I've never been through a traumatic romance [like the one in the song]," she notes, "but I could imagine what that would be like." Debbie continues, "Actually, I wrote that song on an airplane. . . . I don't know how, but the melody just totally popped into my head, and I started singing . . . 'And when you said good-bye. . . .'"

Melodies pop into her head all the time, no matter where she is—she wrote "Wake Up to Love" in social studies class—and when they do, they come quickly. Debbie can write a song in ten minutes, and sometimes, even she doesn't remember all the

words. In concert, she's been known to rely on a lyric sheet to remind her of the very words she's written.

Despite Debbie's incredible success—or maybe because she achieved it at such a young age—she's come under fire more than most songwriters and has felt the need to defend her music. Some critics have held that her songs are simple. Without disagreeing, she's countered that she's not the only artist on the pop scene to do relatively simple songs. Even the revered ex-Beatle George Harrison had a smash hit with "Got My Mind Set on You," a tune that wasn't exactly *complicated*. Debbie deliberately sets out to write songs that most people can relate to. In doing so, she sincerely feels that "simple isn't necessarily bad." She adds, "I don't think I'll ever get really, like, deep or philosophical in my songs!"

Simple or not, several of her songs have been interpreted in a way that's totally alien to Debbie. Take "Shake Your Love." Debbie sees it as a song about a girl saying to a guy, "I still like you, I can't shake my love for you." She wrote it when she was only fourteen years old. Others, however, have intimated that the song is shaded with more suggestive, adult overtones. While she doesn't agree, the interpretation doesn't disturb Debbie in the least. The best thing about a song, she says, "is that people can interpret [it] any way they want and have it mean to them what they want it to mean." As Debbie admitted to *Spin* magazine, she and her friends often discuss what songs mean. "We've talked about that U2 song 'I Still Haven't Found What I'm Looking For' lots of times. We decided it was about religion." Debbie realizes better than anyone that the writer might have had something completely different in mind. She feels, "It's like poetry, it's up for interpretation. It can mean to the listener whatever it means. People are entitled to their opinions."

The only opinions Debbie dashes, however, are those of other musicians or lyricists who seek to change what she's written. It's not pride that brings about her reasoning, but a

strong belief in her own abilities. "Ten people come along and say, 'I think you should change this or change that.' I usually go with instinct, and I'll fight for what I believe in. You know, after it becomes a hit, they say, 'You know, you were right.'"

Debbie wrote "Lookin' for the Right Girl" especially so her friend Scott Grimes could have a new song to sing; "Staying Together" was originally written as a birthday present for a boy she dated briefly. And then there's "Danielle," a musical gift of the heart.

Debbie quietly tells the story of "Danielle": "I wrote a song for my cousin who had a baby. I wrote about the baby, about her first Christmas. And the lyrics were saying, you know, God has brought me the greatest gift, which is you [the baby]. The song is called 'Danielle' because the baby's name is Danielle. My cousin started crying and said, 'You've put into words exactly what I feel. How did you do that?' And I said, 'I don't know, I could just imagine what that would be like. . . .'"

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## Chapter Nine

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### The Flipside—Friends, Family & Fun

"I don't think I've missed out on a normal upbringing or anything," insists Debbie, who calls herself a typical teen. But is it really possible for someone who grew up a musical prodigy and is now a superstar songstress to be at all "typical"? Hard to believe, but in a lot of ways—and much to her family's credit—it really is true. On the flipside of this polished and professional superstar is your basic, normal teen next door. What's more, she aims to stay that way and is pretty sure her family will see to it that she does. "Believe me," she says, "if I started changing in any way, they'd be the first to tell me. My parents really keep everything equal between me and my sisters. I mean, I don't get out of doing the dishes—that never changes!"

Debbie loves to "shop till she drops," watch TV, go to the movies, and talk on the phone with her friends for hours. And since it's Debbie who often does the calling, she and her mom still "discuss" the phone bill. "I have a phone in my room," Debbie says, "but it's not my own phone. I wish I had my own line." When it's her turn to do the dishes, even when she puts the music up real loud, she'd still rather be someplace else.

She has, she once said, "a silly sense of humor—I laugh at

dumb things." She snacks on Nestlé Crunch bars and Cracker Jacks (she's still tickled by the prizes), and thinks cruising around town in her mint green classic convertible is the coolest.

When she writes a note to a friend, she makes big round circles to dot her *is*, spells "thanx" with an *x*, and makes "luv" a three-letter word. She's a self-described night owl who has to keep her alarm clock away from the bed, so that she's forced to get *up* and shut it, and must jump into the shower each morning to fully wake up! She washes her hair daily, is constantly playing "beat the clock" in order not to be late *all* the time, and sometimes worries about "how gross I'm looking." Raisin bran is her breakfast of choice, she knows where to get the *best* Sicilian pizzas in town, and she tries to spend at least an hour a day working out, but that's mostly to build stamina, not for weight control. *That's* not been one of slim Deb's problems.

She listens to rock music and gets crushes on stars all the time—and though she *has* had the opportunity to eyeball one or two of her personal favorites (George Michael, Elton John, and Billy Joel), it hasn't turned her head in the least. In fact, while Deb doesn't disdain the many pleasures and perks of being a star herself, the truth is that she'd really rather get by with a little help from *her* friends.

Those friends run the gamut from grade school chums to other celebrities like herself—and there are some actors and singers she does count as pals—but it's the relationships she formed in junior high and high school that make up her tight circle of *real* friends, girls *and* boys. They are the peers who've nicknamed her Debbie Gibstone (as in the Flintstones), who've watched her go home from school and spend hours on her four-track recorder, who've cheered from the sidelines each tiny victory and cheered her up after each tiny defeat. They are the kids from the neighborhood mostly—Iris, Jennifer, Melissa, Patti, and Chris (a girl), and Ron, Mike, and

Tom—and Debbie always reserves plenty of time for just hanging out. "I like having fun," Debbie says. "I like people who are positive and who can make me laugh."

Before she got famous ("in the good, old, uncomplicated days," as her friend Iris puts it), Debbie and her crowd used to have Super Bowl parties and snowball fights, and drink hot chocolate at Debbie's house. In warmer weather, they'd play tennis at the school's courts across the street or head for the nearby Roosevelt Field shopping mall for a spree. Summers would often find Debbie and her buddies at the town pool, swimming and getting crushes on the lifeguards.

Every once in a while, on a weekend evening, they might hit a teen dance club, but Debbie never did like the closed-in, smoky atmosphere of those places. She describes, instead, a more typical evening with her group: "For the most part, for me and my friends, it's kinda more fun to just hang out at someone's house, 'cause you know, when you're just walking around, you can't talk or anything, so usually we have a Pictionary game at our house. We usually have like ten friends over, order a pizza, make popcorn or something. Or maybe we go to the movies and the diner afterward."

Being able to do some of those normal things became more difficult when Debbie hit the record charts—she admits that she and her friends have to wait until a movie starts and quietly "sneak" in, so as not to be recognized—but the people she did them with didn't change at all. "Success came gradually," Debbie explains, "so my friends don't treat me any differently now."

Success came, of course, when she was still in high school, and even though by her senior year she knew "practically everybody" at Calhoun High, friendships *there* did get a little stickier. As she describes it, "Basically, there were three reactions in school to my success. First, there were my friends, who acted exactly normal. They'd say, like, 'Congratulations. I heard the song on the radio,' things like that. Then we'd drop

the subject and talk about other things. The second reaction was the starstruck kind of thing, like ninth-grade boys would leave a note in my locker saying, 'I can't believe you go to my school!' That kinda makes me feel uncomfortable, so I try to show those kind of people that I'm a normal person.

"Then there was the third reaction. You get some resentment because a lot of people don't realize that there's work involved. It's obviously fun and what I want to do, but people just, like, see your picture in a magazine and say, 'Wow, you're so lucky.' "

Debbie's never had any trouble telling the groups apart. She grins as she comments, "I can spot from a mile away who's my friend, who *wants* to be my friend, and who's definitely *not* my friend." Into that last category fit the kids who were jealous of Debbie's fame. They may not count as friends, but they're not beyond Debbie's understanding. She knows that their jealousy comes mainly from their own insecurity, and from not really knowing her. "For a lot of people, my success, pardon the expression, it came from 'out of the blue.' They thought of me as lucky. But they didn't know anything about me, they didn't know I was working toward it." She also feels that "when there are like five girls in a group, they *want* to *not* like you. It's hard for some of them to deal with the fact that someone's doing what she wants. But it's really not that they don't like *me*—they don't like the idea that I'm famous. It's really two different things."

There was another group in school, too, the kids who only pretended to be Debbie's friends because she had hit records. But once again, perceptive Debbie never had any trouble telling the pretenders apart from her true friends. "You can just tell," she says knowingly. "When all they ask you about is like career stuff, you know that's all they're interested in. With my friends, I could have absolutely nothing new going on in my life, and I could still have a conversation with them. We could

call up and have nothing to talk about and yet talk for three hours!"

And with her true friends, she's not "Debbie, the star." Things don't necessarily revolve around *her*—if someone's on the basketball team, the group, including Debbie, might all go to a game, or if another friend has a tennis match, Debbie might cheer from the sidelines like any other pal. To have a friend is to *be* a friend, and Debbie's one of the best and most loyal anyone could hope for.

Many have openly wondered how her sisters, Karen, Michele, and Denise, have felt about Debbie's soaring success and whether they've felt any twinges of jealousy toward the superstar in the next bedroom. It would seem normal—after all, they, too, are talented musicians and might have wanted a little glory of their own.

But the truth is that within the Gibson family, jealousy has never reared its ugly head. For one thing, all the Gibson girls are as close today as they always were. Debbie's divulged that she and oldest sister Karen are most alike, outgoing and gregarious, while Michele and Denise are the quieter pair. But there are other reasons why resentment has not cropped up, and for all of *them*, credit must go to Diane and Joe Gibson. A close family friend reveals, "Those girls were never denied anything because of Debbie's career. They were never told, 'No, you can't have this or do that because we're busy with Debbie.' It was never like that. The parents may have sacrificed for her career, but the sisters didn't." Instead, Karen, Michele, and Denise have always been encouraged to develop their own unique talents—and they've done that. Both of the older girls, supremely talented pianists, were awarded music scholarships at Vassar College. Debbie's younger sister, Denise, a proficient pianist in her own right, is still in high school. Her love for tennis is an interest the whole family encourages.

Perhaps even more key, however, is that Debbie's astound-

ing success is something the whole family has shared in. Karen—recently married—has been Debbie's sound and lighting engineer for her shows; she now has a job at Atlantic Records. Michele's designed many of Debbie's onstage and on-video outfits; Denise pitches in as a clothes stylist as well.

Family involvement doesn't stop with just her sisters, of course. Diane and Joe Gibson have been an integral part of Debbie's career, and not only in supporting roles, either. All decisions have been made not only with Doug Breitbart's expertise, but by a committee of Gibsons. Debbie describes it this way: "We discuss itineraries and what's best for my career. It's a group effort—everyone's very much a part of it." *Everyone* includes her grandparents, uncles (four of whom appear in her "Electric Youth" video), aunts, and cousins. Her aunt Linda Sanfilippo works in an official capacity, helping to manage some of the business end of her career.

There have been times when Diane and Joe have had to act as protectors for their shining star. They're often the ones to say when Debbie's being overworked, and they're certainly the ones with an eye out for shielding her from the unsavory aspects of the world of rock 'n' roll. All in all, "Team Gibson" forms a tight circle around Debbie, nurturing, supporting, and protecting her.

When Debbie travels, many family members come along with her; she'd have it no other way. Debbie genuinely likes being around her clan. "I have an intelligent, level-headed family, and it's good to have them around. Besides, the only people you can really trust are your family," she asserts. They are her closest friends.

Debbie readily admits that as she gets more and more famous—and busy—keeping up her real friendships requires extra effort. She is happy to make it. Even when she is thousands of miles away, perhaps in Hollywood, Debbie always makes sure to get to a phone and share all the excitement with her friends back home.

Whenever possible, Debbie asks a friend to come along with her to a press conference, or party, even to an awards ceremony. She invited her pal Iris to the 1989 New York Music Awards. There, even though "Debbie was the big attraction," Iris recalls, "she still remembered it was my birthday and gave me a pair of earrings. Debbie won four awards that night, but still wasn't all wrapped up in herself. She really hasn't changed at all, which is excellent."

Debbie has never been selfish about sharing her creative side, as well. She'd always play the music she was writing for her friends and ask *their* opinions. Usually, it was positive. "I was one of the first people to hear 'Only in My Dreams,'" confides Melissa Nadler. Her reaction? "I was bugging out! I was in total shock—it was *so* incredible!"

When high school graduation rolled around, Debbie made sure she was there to celebrate that milestone with her best buddies. Although it couldn't have been easy for her—she was just about to start her first headlining cross-country tour and had been rehearsing for months—when the big day rolled around, on June 26, 1988, Debbie Gibson, honor student (she graduated in the top twenty-five percent of her class, with a 91 average), was there in cap and gown, beside her friends to collect her diploma. She looked just like any of the other Calhoun High graduates—except, of course, for the hordes of photographers following her around. But Debbie didn't let that detract from her happiness that day—she was glad to share some of it with her fans, so she smiled as the photogs snapped away. She knew that the best part of the celebration, with her family, was yet to come.

Proud as they were of her career, Debbie's extended family was just as proud of "Graduate Gibson." Debbie received a gold-and-diamond watch as a graduation present from her loving parents at a postcommencement party held at her aunt's house. There, Debbie entertained on the piano while everyone gathered round and sang.

For Debbie, however, it was a day of mixed emotions. Excited to be graduating, she was also a little sad. From that moment on, she knew she'd be seeing her friends only at vacation times, as they, for the most part, were going off to college, while she was headed for the wide-open world of pop stardom. A chapter in her life was ending; a new one was beginning.

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## Chapter Ten

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### Electric Youth

Debbie dove headlong into the planning for LP number two, even though this time, she was admittedly nervous. The girl who'd been nothing but confident all along was scared. She kept hearing the long-held industry myth about "sophomore slump"—and it was *not* music to her ears. The conventional wisdom held that artists with a phenomenally successful debut LP are bound to come up short with the second one. It happens all the time, she was advised.

"It isn't going to happen to me," Debbie decided. Once again, she felt she had to prove that she was not just a flash in the pan, that her success was not just a fluke or brilliant marketing ploy, as had been suggested on occasion. She *could* repeat her success, and her second, or sophomore, album was going to be every bit as good as the first had been. In fact, it was going to be better. And a determined Debbie Gibson is all but unstoppable.

Debbie began by sifting through the hundreds of songs she'd already written—deciding between those and the fresh ones coming out of her pen every day. She went to work once again with Fred Zarr, but this time got to produce six of the eleven songs on the record that would be titled *Electric Youth*. She was to spend five months recording it, which in the music biz is a very long time.

Debbie talks excitedly about this second album and how she was going to make it different from her first. "*Out of the Blue*," she explains, "showed only the dance-pop side of me. *Electric Youth* is a better representation of me." She adds, "Not that the lyrics are deeper, because I believe that pop music should be fun. I think we hear enough about depressing world issues in the news. But I would say that the lyrics are a little more mature." She also admits that the songs on *Electric Youth* did evolve more from personal experience. "Before, I was just guessing, kind of using clichés. The songs [on *EY*] mean more to me now, and I can sing with more feeling because I know what I'm talking about a little more!"

The songs on *Electric Youth* certainly are more thoughtful; some even seem troubled. The LP starts off with the musical question "Who Loves Ya Baby?" and though the singer appears to be addressing someone else—a star who's adored by millions but is still alone—Debbie could indeed be talking about herself.

Another song on *Electric Youth* that also marks Debbie's maturity is called "Over the Wall," and it's all about the importance of taking risks and bettering yourself.

*Electric Youth* is peppered with love songs, lots of love songs, but even those are less carefree, echoing love's more complicated, and even sad side. On "Silence Speaks (A Thousand Words)," a girl is being ignored by the guy of her dreams; in "Love in Disguise," Debbie sings about a couple who've broken up, but who still love each other. "Should've Been the One" is about longing for the guy you'll never get; "We Could Be Together," Debbie's personal favorite, is about giving up a "safe" relationship for someone society says you shouldn't go out with, someone perhaps of a different race, religion, or clique.

The two love songs that may give you a clue to Debbie's deepest, most personal real-life feelings are "Lost in Your

Eyes" and "Helplessly in Love," for at the time she wrote them, she was seeing actor Brian Bloom.

But perhaps no song is a better reflection of Debbie's feelings and dreams than the one she named the album for. In an Atlantic Records press release, Debbie described what "Electric Youth" means to her: "When I was in elementary school, I participated in a program . . . that focused on developing children's creativity outside of the regular curriculum. If you have children or simply remember what it was like to be a child, you realize how much energy a young person has and how many off-the-wall ideas only a child can come up with. "Electric Youth" is about not dismissing a young person's ideas because he or she is just a kid. I owe a lot to my family and teachers for helping to develop my creative side and for teaching me and many other children how to channel energy and ideas into worthwhile and creative projects."

*Electric Youth*, the album, turned out to be extremely creative and worthwhile. For if fame had beckoned with *Out of the Blue*, it had arrived squarely on Debbie's doorstep on the currents of *Electric Youth*. And fame certainly had it's "A" side—as in achievements, accolades, and awards.

From the moment it came out, in January 1989, it made immediate—*electric*—waves. Powered by its first single, the heartfelt ballad "Lost in Your Eyes," *Electric Youth* shot to the Number 1 spot on *Billboard's* Top Pop LP chart in a swift six weeks, not to be dislodged from that exalted position for another five fabulous weeks. That was the longest that a teen star has ever topped that survey. And that was only *one* of the records Debbie set during that head-spinning spring of 1989. "Lost in Your Eyes" had its own run at the top of the Hot 100 Singles chart—which made Debbie the first female to have written, produced, and performed *two* Number 1 singles. The pairing of her single and album at their respective chart positions gave her the honor of being the first female teen pop star *ever* to have topped *Billboard's* Hot 100 Singles and Top

Pop LP charts simultaneously. Only one male teen had ever done it before—the year was 1963, and the singer was Stevie Wonder.

Debbie was delighted, but the recognition and accolades were coming her way so fast, she could hardly keep up with them. She was asked to perform at the Atlantic Records Fortieth Anniversary party, a black-tie TV event attended by the biggest names in music, including legends like Aretha Franklin, Mick Jagger, and Phil Collins. She was a guest on CBS-TV's *Easter Parade Special*; she was not only nominated for an American Music Award (as Favorite Female Vocalist), but chosen to be one of four hosts on that highly rated TV event, where she performed an exciting rendition of "Lost in Your Eyes."

Debbie also got to meet Billy Joel, and perform onstage with him and Elton John, truly a personal highlight of her life. She'd already won a pair of 1988 New York Music Awards; in 1989 she found herself nominated for six more of them and walked away with *four*, including Artist of the Year, Song of the Year (that was for "Foolish Beat"), and Female Pop Vocalist. USA Network's *Nightracks* TV show elected her Best Female Artist of the Year, and she topped Nickelodeon's Kids' Choice survey (Best Teen Act of the Year) for two years running.

What Debbie learned during her first breathtaking fling at the top, however, was that just like a record, fame also had its "B" side—as in bad. An optimistic, positive person like Debbie doesn't dwell on the downside of being famous, but even she can't deny its bothersome existence. And sometimes, some of what she'd said or done occasionally backfired on her.

In the early throes of excitement, she'd naively described her house to reporters, practically giving away its location. When fame came, so did the fans—in hordes. The Gibsons had to have police cars parked at the corner to protect their privacy. Somehow, too, what Debbie describes as their "private,

private" phone number got out, and Debbie began getting all sorts of crank calls—a pretty scary situation. Eventually, in the summer of 1988, Debbie and her family had to quietly pack up and move away from her childhood home. The clan resettled in a more secluded new home in a Long Island North Shore town. Their new house is an extraordinarily beautiful and elaborate contemporary one that the family is thrilled with, but this time, Debbie's not divulging any details of her new location. "We're not telling anyone where we live," she resolved, "except for our closest, closest friends." Debbie was always smart—she's had to learn to be a lot less trusting.

Going out with her friends had admittedly become tougher, too, for Debbie gets recognized all the time. But she doesn't *really* mind all that much. "Going to malls has become a little tougher, but I don't care, I still go. I just say to myself, 'I'm gonna go.' I can't not go out. I'll walk into a store, and one person will recognize me, and then five people will come over for an autograph."

Autographs are something Debbie never minds dispensing, not because she's the least bit egotistical, but just because *she* remembers what it's like to be a fan and how important it can seem to get an autograph from a star. She related an anecdote to reporter John Leland: "I once wanted to meet [singer] Paul Young, who was appearing at a record store, signing copies of his LP. Even though I would have been one of eight-hundred people meeting him, it just would have meant so much to meet someone you've been listening to. . . . I wanted to go so badly, and I was so disappointed when I couldn't go."

Debbie's always accommodating when approached for autographs. The only times she gets uncomfortable around fans are when *they're* obviously uncomfortable around her. In those situations, Debbie tries extra hard to let people see that "really, I'm just like everyone else!"

For one who's come so far, so fast, Debbie's handled her success with aplomb and amazing grace. She's been focused,

and even driven, but never selfish, not in material ways and certainly not in spirit. She's tried to acknowledge everyone who ever helped her get to where she is—just check out the thank you list on both of her albums. She rarely nixes an interview, sharing herself openly and honestly with fans. She's even gone back to her town's elementary school at the request of a former teacher, to talk to, and inspire, the students. She's also taken time out for charity appearances *and* even once gave a full-fledged concert at the rural Mandan High School in North Dakota, where students had sent in more postcards than any other school in the USA to win a concert.

There have been no ego-related tantrums from this true teen sensation. There *was* a less-than-amicable parting of the ways with Doug Breitbart, but that had more to do with the adults surrounding her and almost nothing at all to do with Debbie herself. Personally, Debbie's had relatively few "tiffs" marring her smooth ascent to superstardom. Most everyone who meets her, likes her.

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## Chapter Eleven

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### Fashion Flair—Debbie Style

"I'm glad the image I portray is totally honest," Debbie says. What you see *is* what you get: a down-to-earth, clean-cut, funky teenager. Nowhere is that image more clearly expressed than in her cool and comfortable clothes. With Debbie, that could mean baggy jeans and a oversized T-shirt, or sweats, her Hard Rock Cafe baseball jacket, and high-top sneakers, or a miniskirt with leggings and bunchy socks. She tops almost every outfit off with a wide-brimmed black hat. She owns fifty of them, and when she was first starting out as a singer, they were her trademark.

Debbie feels her own ideas about fashion work for most teen girls. "Don't try to be someone you're not," she advises. "Don't *try* to be cool. People who *do* usually aren't!" She feels strongly that "being hip is looking comfortable with who you are." Debbie thinks her peers should not wear what fashion dictates—"I'm not really into fashion or any of those fancy designers," she states—but, simply, "wear what *you* like." For Debbie, it's uncluttered, fresh clothes that are still fun. She doesn't worry about what others may think of her and passes *that* advice on to her fans. "Accept the fact that some people will like you and some won't. Be yourself!"

Her simple philosophy is that the performers who stick around longest are the ones who are *themselves*, "because then

you don't have to worry, 'Oh, it's time to change my image.' For me, my image isn't sexy, it's fun."

Debbie's determined to leave the "sexy stuff" to older performers, like Madonna, who can carry it off. That's why when Debbie was starting out, she fought so hard for LP covers and publicity shots that didn't invent a phony image. She wanted to be portrayed as she was: fresh, young, and innocent. Though she didn't have her way that first time around, on *Out of the Blue* she does have it now. "I've earned the right to be myself," she proclaims triumphantly. She sees herself as not so very different from most young people her age. "I blend in with the thousands of other teenage girls at the mall," she says. "I don't call attention to myself."

Not that she hasn't experimented with the odd offbeat look. As she remembers, "Once I wanted to wear my jeans cut short with a blazer, but we were going on a plane and my mom didn't like it. She said that because my dad works for the airline, 'You're a reflection on your father, and you're dressing too weird.' Mom ended up winning."

Debbie thinks it's cool to add dash to her style with kitschy costume jewelry, which on occasion has included a Japanese Santa Claus ring, pins, pendants, and a giant wristwatch—or two. Many of her outrageous ornaments have come from fans, and Debbie's always proud to wear those. She likes to wear big earrings, as well, and thinks all fashion-conscious teens should use fun accessories to accent their own personal styles.

When it comes to makeup, Debbie's style is bright, but not brassy, hip but not *too* hot. She thinks most girls look best with a light base, black mascara (it's important to bring out your eyes), and maybe some clear or neutral lip color. For special occasions or evenings, what works well for Debbie are brown shadows with a soft pink blush. She thinks teens should experiment with makeup to find what's best for each individual—keeping it simple, however, is her best advice.

Debbie's style was exactly what the folks at Revlon cosmet-

ics were looking for—they signed Debbie as a spokesperson for their Natural Wonder line. "We picked Debbie," according to Revlon's Ina Wallman, "because she really reaches the ears and eyes of the teen market. She represents all that's wholesome and healthy. Besides, Debbie really wears Natural Wonder makeup, offstage and on. She likes lipstick—bubble gum pink's her preference—plus a bit of blusher on her cheeks.

Debbie wears pink nail polish most of the time, and now she's got a fruity, floral fragrance named after one of her hits, Electric Youth. She splashes on some of that before going out.

Her hair is basically straight, but Debbie's done quite a bit of experimenting with different styles. A natural look *is* very important, Debbie feels, but that doesn't mean a girl shouldn't help herself along a little. Debbie admits to highlighting her own locks, which started out blond but got darker as she got older.

Debbie likes to wear her hair simply: basic bangs and a high pony tail, held in place with a colorful clip, ribbon, or bow. When someone once suggested that that look made her seem awfully young, she experimented by brushing her hair back all the way and getting a soft body wave. Debbie changes her hairstyle periodically, mainly because it's fun to have different looks.

Good health is something Debbie doesn't take for granted, and she urges her fans not to either. Because of her hectic, busy life, she's found herself run-down on occasion and has had her bouts with illness. "No one realizes how frail Debbie really is," her voice coach explains. Because of her personal experience, Debbie really understands the importance of a healthy life-style.

Debbie doesn't smoke or drink. She doesn't ever go near drugs—or near anyone who does them. She works out by doing daily aerobics and knows how important exercise is to a healthy body. She watches what she eats, too. Junk food's

okay, but in moderation, and she sticks to diet sodas instead of sugary drinks.

Debbie's personal style is obvious, too, not only in her appearance, but in how she's decorated her room. For most of her life, she's enjoyed having her own bedroom. To see it is to know who Debbie is. The wallpaper's busy and colorful, "green, orange, pink, blue, and yellow with little dots and stuff all over it," in Debbie's words. From the ceiling hang little satin pillows and music notes. One wall is covered with posters and collages she's made of celebrities ranging from River Phoenix to George Michael. On her bulletin board are snapshots of friends, letters, and invitations. Another wall boasts a mural she's painting herself. Rows of dolls sit along-side her teddy bear collection, and a computer vies for space on her desk with books, notebooks, assorted plaques, stuff from contests, pens, pencils, and tapes.

But there's another side to Debbie, the thoughtful, introspective side, and amid all the clutter of her room, it's there she goes to unwind after one of her usual frenetic days. In her room, Debbie truly finds her private time. She uses it sometimes to compose, other times to read ("I love to read before going to sleep," she reveals. Books of choice lately are celebrity bios.) Most often, she uses her private time just to kick back, relax, and dream.

Every night before closing her eyes, Debbie Gibson says a little prayer. She believes in a higher spirit—and knows she's got a lot to be thankful for.

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## Chapter Twelve

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### Boy Talk

Debbie Gibson doesn't have a boyfriend. Not what you could call a real, true, steady one, anyway. "I kind of date people on and off," she's admitted. That doesn't mean, however, that she wouldn't *like* to have a special someone in her life. And the truth is that the line forms around the block for all the guys who'd love *that* honor.

On her *Electric Youth* album, Debbie asks the musical question 'Who Loves Ya Baby?' and the answer, in her case, is just about *everybody*. Guys definitely go dotty for Deb. In her, they see not some exotically gorgeous fantasy creature, but a real-life, fun-loving teen who sparkles with energy and verve, whose friendliness and sincerity shine through.

The field of candidates is wide open—it sure looks like Ms. Gibson could snap her fingers and have the guy of her dreams in a second. It isn't all that simple. As Deb would be the first to tell you, things like boys and love get complicated when you're famous. It's not that you don't *meet* guys, but the ones you *do* meet aren't always the ones you'd *like* to meet. The really nice ones are often just too intimidated to even *approach* Debbie Gibson, the singing star, let alone try to get to know her. Debbie understands their reluctance, even if she really doesn't see what the big deal is. "I guess they might think I'll

have an attitude or something," she figures. "But give me a break. I haven't changed, and I'll never have an attitude."

There's no end to the stream of guys who *are* willing to come right up and introduce themselves, but Debbie's learned not to get her hopes up, because many of them turn out to be interested in her *only* because she's a star. They haven't the slightest intention of finding out what she's really like; they're just hoping to be seen with her, so maybe a little stardust will rub off on them. Debbie can decipher those kinds of boys in a flash and ditches them immediately.

Even though she's not going with anyone, Debbie's very clear about what she likes in a guy, what's important and what's totally bogus. She says, "I like guys who aren't too cool to act silly. I like guys who are into sports, music, art, whatever. I like guys who'll stick up for their girl."

Surprisingly, she says, "Looks aren't really that important to me!" She continues, "I know that sounds really like . . . people go, 'Yeah, sure!' But I really go more for personality. Sometimes I'll like someone, and all my friends will go, 'Why do you like that person?' I may go for someone that nobody else likes!"

What else does Deb look for? "I like to laugh a lot, to be with someone who's fun, y'know?" Debbie adds to that, someone who's *creative*, the quality that turns Debbie on most of all.

For she not only is a girl who knows what she likes, Debbie Gibson is not terribly shy about going *after* what she likes. That is, if Debbie thinks she might want to get to know someone, she may very well make the first move: she phones up boys all the time. She admits, "I'm not the shiest person. . . . I *can* be, but for the most part I'm pretty outgoing!"

Guys she feels most comfortable about calling, naturally, are those with whom she has something in common. Scott Grimes is one fellow performer who fills that bill perfectly. Since they

met several years ago and used to sing together, they're already good friends. Whenever Debbie goes to California, Scott tops her list of people to call. A bright, funny, easygoing type, Scott's working on dual careers as an actor and a singer—he's already got one well-received album out—and going to college at the same time. That's certainly a schedule Debbie can relate to!

When Debbie and Scott are together, they'll do typical "Hollywood" things, like attend the latest celebrity movie screening and hang out with Scott's actor friends who might include Chris Young and Alyssa Milano. Or if Debbie's in California because she's got a concert date there, she'll invite Scott and his whole gang to come see her—last time she sold out Los Angeles' Greek Theater, Debbie made sure Scott, his sister Heather, Alyssa Milano, and actor Ryan Lambert had front-row seats.

Although Scott admits that he probably had a crush on Debbie when they were both a good deal younger, nowadays, their relationship is strictly platonic. Yes, he loves her, and yes, she loves him right back—but only as good friends can love each other.

Another actor who "loves" Debbie—that is, who admitted to a fascination with her—is Brian Robbins, who plays Eric on TV's *Head of the Class* sitcom. Brian had a guest spot as an MTV veejay a while back, and after playing one of Debbie's videos, he decided that *she* was someone he'd really like to meet. An MTV crew person got that message to Debbie, and she sent Brian an autographed *Out of the Blue* LP. In it, she tucked a personal note—and her phone number! Brian wasted no time getting in touch with her. It took a while ("We kept leaving messages on each other's answering machines," Brian lamented), but eventually, they did meet when both were chosen to cohost Nickelodeon's *Kids' Choice Awards* TV special.

A friendship blossomed. Debbie invited native New Yorker

Brian to come to the Brooklyn studios where she was recording *Electric Youth*; Brian in turn asked Debbie to be his guest at a New York Knicks basketball game. Although they enjoyed each other's company, a romance never did develop. Brian returned to the West Coast to do his TV show and soon after met and fell in love with Holly Robinson (*21 Jump Street*). Brian and Debbie remained on friendly terms, however—he and Holly were among the guests invited to Debbie's eighteenth birthday bash in Los Angeles in August 1988.

There was another good-looking guy Debbie met in Los Angeles when she cohosted the *Kids Choice Awards*, tall, dark, and handsome actor Wil Wheaton. He'd starred in the movie *Stand by Me* and was a regular in the TV series *Star Trek: The Next Generation*. Wil had wanted to meet Debbie for a long time, but felt a little weird about it. "He thought of her as being larger than life," an insider states. What he couldn't know was that Debbie apparently felt the same way about him! In fact, when they did come face-to-face for the first time, they asked for each other's autographs!

Serious, funny, honest, and extremely creative—Wil's a writer, too—he fell for Debbie in a big way. Once he got started talking about "Her Gibbs," he couldn't stop. Wil was enchanted by her talent, her energy, her sincerity—in "Hollywood-weird," as some people call it, you don't meet many people as sweet, friendly, fun-loving, and intelligent as Debbie. Wil put pictures of her all over his walls and a special one next to his computer.

Debbie gave Wil a CD version of *Electric Youth*; they exchanged private phone numbers and for months kept the cross-country phone lines burning. When Debbie found herself in Los Angeles, she elected to spend her one free day entirely with Wil. They went to the beach and spent hours and hours walking, talking, and getting to know each other better. But that was a rare day for Deb—all too soon she had to jet back home to New York. The biggest obstacle to their relationship,

in fact, turned out to be the three thousand miles between them; they just didn't get the chance to see each other very often. And *that* can put a serious damper on any relationship.

But there was possibly another reason why Wil and Debbie never got past the "just good friends" stage—and his name is Brian Bloom. Brian, of the too-blue-to-believe eyes, is that rare combination of talented actor/creative musician and intelligent, *nice* guy. Wrap *that* on six feet of "to die for" gorgeousness, and you've got a guy any girl would fall for. Did Debbie? Here's what she told the press: "Usually, I'll talk on the phone until midnight to Brian. It's kinda hard to say anyone's a steady boyfriend . . . but he's sort of. He's very down-to-earth and a lot of fun."

Debbie also discussed how much she admires Brian for being able to gracefully and honestly balance a career in show biz with a normal life—"he's on the swim team, he has regular friends," she observed. Since that was exactly the kind of balance Debbie herself was striving for, she understood that it wasn't easy, either.

What's clear about the Gibson-Bloom match is that the pair met when both were guests at a party for a New York radio station. They got to talking and found they had a lot in common. The same age, they both grew up in Merrick, New York. They also shared a love for music—Brian plays guitar, writes original songs, and even had a mini-recording studio set up at his home similar to Debbie's.

It looked like the foundation was there for *something* to happen. But there was one catch: Brian was involved in another relationship at the time. It wasn't one he had any intentions of ending.

He and Debbie did begin seeing each other, but only as friends. Mostly, Brian would go over to Debbie's house. As she describes it, ". . . we'll sit and listen to music for hours. He's into Luther Vandross, that sort of thing." They also spent time in Debbie's studio, playing music together. Debbie often

previewed new tunes she was working on to get Brian's opinion. Brian did the same. Sometimes, they'd sing together, two young voices blended in sweet harmonies. "Brian and Debbie are both very creative," says someone who was close to the situation, "that's one of the things they like best about each other." Debbie herself adds, "We can talk for hours and hours about nothing."

Since both were dealing with hectic schedules that combined school and show biz, they really didn't get together all that often. But when Debbie was on the road, she included Brian on the list of people who got a detailed copy of her itinerary so he'd know how to reach her.

And when Debbie's high school prom night rolled around, it was Brian she asked to be her escort. Double-dating with Debbie's friends and dancers Buddy Casimano and Chris Clarke, they made a handsome pair, he in a formal tux, she in a strapless dress she'd picked up in a London boutique.

"They had a nice, healthy relationship," an insider recalls. But because of their celeb status, their every move was reported in a gossip-hungry press, and that didn't sit too well with either of them. It got to the point where Brian said publicly, "This whole thing's been blown out of proportion." Scooting between acting assignments (Brian filmed three TV movies during his "Debbie days," guest-starred in several TV shows, which required him to be on the West Coast, and filmed a miniseries in Europe) and SATs (college aptitude tests), busy Brian really regarded his relationship with Debbie as less a romance than a happy friendship. Word is that she's come to feel the same way, but she clearly wrote a song or two with him in mind—and in her heart.

After high school graduation, both Brian and Debbie became even busier: he landed a contract with Universal Studios; she landed in the pop history books when *Electric Youth* came out. Brian and Debbie really couldn't help drifting apart.

Thinking about it all later, Debbie decided, "I guess I've

never really been in love." What she might have said is that she's never really had the time. For *true* love is built on relationships, and there's no getting around it—relationships take time to build and need constant nurturing. What Debbie's nurtured most in her nineteen years is her music!

But when all's said and done, that's really okay with Debbie. Making music *is* her life right now; it's all she's ever wanted to do and all she's ever worked for. Having a record out is the most important thing in her life, and she's more than willing to do all that has to be done to stay on top. She feels strongly that "if you do have a record out, there's something wrong if you're *not* busy. I'd rather be busy than sitting still." Busy, for Debbie, means performing, recording, filming videos, giving interviews, touring all over the world, and, always, creating new music. If that leaves little time for love, so be it.

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## Chapter Thirteen

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### Debbie Live—& on Tape

Music's throbbing, the band is hot! Hands are clapping, fingers snapping, feet stomping—don't you wanna dance? Spotlight's beaming, electricity's in the air . . . and the chant begins: "Deb-bie, Deb-bie, Deb-bie!"

And suddenly, from a puff of smoke, out *she* bounds, black and white and blond all over, a whirling musical dervish of kinetic energy, dancing, prancing, belting out the high notes, letting the beat take her where it may. Debbie Gibson is onstage, *live* and, at this moment, frozen in time, there's nowhere in the universe she'd rather be. "I *love* performing," she says with a sigh.

For *her*, this is what it's all been about. All those years of wishing and hoping and planning and dreaming, of composing and recording and producing and arranging—for her, the pot of gold at the end of the rainbow was always the performance.

The little girl who was, admittedly, "always hammy" now gets to be the big girl who hams it up *royally*, to the delight of thousands of waving, screaming, feverish fans. She barely has to urge, "C'mon, put your hands together," because they're already clapping, swaying, and singing along. And they know all the words, always, to every song. "Imagine, thousands of people singing along with a song I wrote in my bedroom at two A.M.! It's the greatest kick," Debbie says. Doesn't matter if

she's in London or Hong Kong, or hometown New York; Houston, Boston, Philadelphia, or San Francisco—Debbie's fans are legion, loving (each audience is dotted with pony-tailed Debbie "wanna-bes"), and devoted. Seeing her in concert is, for many, a dream of a lifetime.

Debbie gives a *performance*, not merely a rendition of her hits, or a by-the-clock, stereotyped rock concert. She glitzes up each show with several slick-quick changes, from an innocent black mini to an oversize denim-with-dash-of-glitter jacket. She personalizes the show for each audience, doing her encores in a T-shirt from *their* city. She humanizes her between-songs patter with anecdotes about what she was doing when she wrote this song, how she felt when she wrote that one. She makes sure the audience doesn't feel distanced from her. She encourages lots of participation.

Debbie reaches out, and there's not a single fan who isn't touched—by her energy, talent, and obvious love for what she's doing. She's sincere—and it shows. "If the kids weren't screaming, there'd be something wrong," she says.

Debbie makes her concerts magical, and anyone who goes remembers them forever. She does it deliberately, and she knows *how* to do it, because she, too, is a fan. She, too, was weaned on rock concerts and knows in her bones what makes a great one. She's determined to make hers the best. For that reason, Debbie's in on every detail of the planning, preparation, and putting-it-all-together of her concert tours. She picks the songs to be sung *and* what order's best to do them in. She's not being egotistical, just smart. A case in point: She says, "A lot of people told me about my show, 'Oh, you're starting out with too up-tempo a song, you're using all the lighting tricks in the first song, you're giving it all away.' " But Debbie knew, just from *going* to so many concerts herself, that it's best to grab the audience right from the start. That's how she wants it, and it works like magic.

The dynamic dance steps and dramatic moves at—and on

top of—the piano are partly Debbie's doing, too. Because of all those dance lessons, Debbie has her own original ideas for her show's choreography and gets to help hire the dance pros who put it all together.

When it came time to put a *band* together, Debbie ditched the advice that she ought to hook up with an already existing group of touring musicians. She felt strongly about putting a group together from scratch, one that she could continue to work with way beyond her first tour.

She personally picked the boys in the band, too—hometown hunks with talent and personalities to match their knockout good looks. Tommy Williams is someone Debbie knew from her neighborhood. She recalls, giggling, "When I was nine and he was fourteen, we were both in the same play, *The Sound of Music* . . . and [we] really hated each other!" They were both, she explains, attention hogs and were always trying to outdo each other.

As they grew, their interest in music—and Tommy's dates with Karen Gibson—drew them together. Debbie began to really admire Tommy's talent; she thought of him right off the bat for her lead guitarist. She relied on Tommy's expertise to recommend other players, too. Everyone he brought got to audition, often in front of the entire Gibson team. Some did their try-outs right in the middle of Debbie's living room.

It didn't take very long before the Debbie Gibson backup band was put together. Besides lead guitarist (and co-musical director) Tommy, the supporting players were Adam Tese on saxophone, bongos and keys, Kirk Powers on bass, and Lou Appel on drums. In addition, Debbie decided on a dancing duo, Keith Stewart and Buddy Casimano, plus three backup singers. That *does* add up to a lot of people, but Debbie always intended to put on a big, no-holds-barred show. She does, every time.

Something else she does in concert every time shows her generosity. During a break in each show, Debbie gives her

backup players a chance to shine. While she's offstage, changing costumes, the band takes over. Each musician gets to showcase his skill and considerable charm; dancers Keith and Buddy do amazing displays of acrobatics when they take center stage. Because of Debbie's desire to share the spotlight with her "boys," they've become quite popular and get their own fan mail.

What most people don't realize about a concert of this magnitude is that it's expensive—and usually, it's the artist herself who foots the bill. There were those who warned Debbie that taking this many people, and so much equipment, on the road with her, was going to mean she might not do very well financially in the end. Didn't matter, Debbie said. She wanted a show that was done right, that didn't cut any corners, and besides, she admits, "I would do a show for nothing." That's how dedicated Debbie is to performing.

"C'mon, everybody, time to board the bus. We're taking *this* show on the road!" The months of rehearsals are over, Debbie and her crew are ready and raring to go. Everyone goes by big, bright tour bus, and the mood on-board is heady with anticipation, giddy and familial, just as it might be with a bus full of happy campers. "It's like the teen tour we all never went on," jokes Debbie.

Aside from the band and members of the crew, there's always a liberal sprinkling of Gibsons on-board: mom Diane is ever present, overseeing every last detail. But often Grandma Josephine, Grandpa Al, and younger sis Denise are filling the seats on the bus too. Denise went along on a few of Debbie's early tour dates and had such a good time that when school's out and she can get away, she does just that. "I didn't know you had so many fans," a surprised Denise said to Debbie that first time around.

Debbie loves having her family with her on the road; she really wouldn't have it any other way. She's aware that other

performers, even those as young as she is, often tour with only their managers and business people. That's something Debbie doesn't think she could ever do. "What if I didn't feel well? I mean, there are certain things only a mother could do for you."

As the Gibson brigade pulls into each new city, the excitement builds. Debbie can never wait to hit the stage. But *backstage*, where you might expect her to be a bundle of nerves, she's cool, calm, and collected. Sometimes, she may practice dance steps or warm up her voice by singing. Or she may open gifts from fans, or even be engrossed in a hot match of her favorite game, Pictionary, minutes before she's to jump onstage. Is it possible she's not the least bit nervous, not bugged by even the tiniest case of the "what ifs?"—as in, What if I forget the words? or trip on a step? or just plain goof? Doing a concert is not the same as recording—there are no "take twos". But Debbie feels very much at home on stage and doesn't see it quite so dramatically. "I'm one of those 'can get through anything' type people," she calmly explains. "Besides, if I make a mistake on stage, people will see that I'm a normal person. You gotta roll with the punches. [Onstage], that's where it's at, where people know who you are and who you're not!"

She is *very* confident about her performance. She says simply, "The bottom line is, if you can't do it live, you can't do it."

Critics, who don't get paid to be kind, universally applaud Deb's stage act. "Debbie Gibson is a confident, energetic performer who can hold a stage and captivate a crowd," crowed *The Hartford Courant's* Frank Rizzo. *Long Island Newsday's* Wayne Robbins added, "She bounded about the stage, punctuating her songs with precisely choreographed dance routines that gave the show a relentless yet focused energy. . . . Gibson seemed in command of every aspect of both music and staging."

When the music's over, when she's sung the last song,

Debbie's usually done for the night. No wild rock 'n' roll partying for her—she doesn't have the energy, even if she wants to. "I usually just go to sleep," she acknowledges, "after some tea and honey for my throat." The boys in the band, no matter what they *look* like, are not real heavy rock partyers, either, according to Deb. "No one even smokes in the band," she offers. "On the road it's pretty much the same routine for all of us. We go from the show to the bus to the hotel—to sleep!"

Although not done before a live audience, making videos has a very special appeal for Debbie Gibson—in them, she gets to combine her dramatic flair with her musical genius. "I love making videos," she says, "because people get to see another whole side of me."

As soon as "Only in My Dreams" hit, Debbie's video career began. She jumped into it with the exact same mixture of enthusiasm, creativity, and strong opinions she brought to her records and concerts. Debbie knew exactly what she wanted.

"As soon as I write a song," Deb confides, "I picture the video in my head. A song has a mood, and I can just visualize what I want." Each of her videos has been different and dynamic in its own way, from the flashing bed-on-the-beach and carousel images of "Only in My Dreams," to the intimate scene of Debbie in her bedroom drifting through a photo album for "Out of the Blue." The "Shake Your Love" video featured high-concept choreography, "Foolish Beat" portrayed the drama and pain of love gone wrong.

"Lost in Your Eyes" was the first video Debbie actually helped direct, along with the talented video veteran Jim Ukage. After writing the song, Debbie drew pictures—called storyboards—of how she visualized the sets for the video. "They were pitiful drawings," she admits.

"Electric Youth", however, was the video that excited Debbie the most. "It's major," she declares. "There's lots to

look at—it's like a minimovie!" What Debbie wanted for "Electric Youth" was a different look, altogether. Naturally, she had some definite ideas. The song opens with the sound of trumpets, and that made Debbie think of a castle. Again, she put her thoughts down on paper, drawing pictures to the best of her ability. They weren't a big improvement over her first try, but, obviously, she got her ideas across. They translated into the most magnificent castle, built especially for "Electric Youth." When she first saw the castle, Debbie remembers, "It was like seeing a cartoon come to life!"

Debbie wanted something more for "EY"—some really serious dancing. To get that, she set her sights on the hottest young choreographer around, twenty-three-year-old whiz kid Barry Lather, the dance mastermind behind Janet Jackson's "Pleasure Principle" video *and* George Michael's "Faith" tour.

Debbie put in her request for Barry to work with her, and he was thrilled to come aboard. Since he's based in California and Deb's an East Coast girl, they met first on the phone. "I talked to her a lot," Barry relates, "and she told me some of the things she wanted to do. They sounded great to me." Debbie sent Barry her drawings, and after looking at them and giving the record several listens, he came up with some dance ideas of his own. With all that in mind, Barry came to New York to meet Debbie in person.

"When I first met Debbie, I could tell she was really excited," Barry said, "and I knew after only a couple of hours what I was going to be able to give her. We tossed around a lot of ideas—she was really willing to try *anything*, and, you know, not everyone's like that." But if Debbie was uncomfortable with any of the steps Barry taught her, she'd say so and they'd try something different.

Rehearsal for the "EY" video took place in the small Actor's Space studio on New York City's West Side, then it was off to Los Angeles for the actual taping. "We used four different sets," Barry says, "the castle, a dungeon, a laser room, and

just a bare, white set. Most videos don't use more than two sets, this was really major." He continues, "Debbie would get to the set early each day. She wanted to be really prepared to do things right."

Doing things Debbie's way meant spending lots of time, and money, on the video. It helped that, reportedly, Revlon chipped in to finance it so the company could use video clips in ads for the perfume. "Electric Youth" cost at least double what most videos do. It was important to Debbie that she give her fans the absolute best. "We had six hours of footage," she reveals, which had to be edited down to under five minutes. Debbie helped with that, too. Though she returned to New York once the shoot was complete, daily edits were sent to her so she could approve them. "That video went back and forth between the East and West coasts so many times, I lost track of it," says choreographer Barry. The result, everyone agrees, was smashingly electric.

A four-video package that includes "Only in My Dreams," "Out of the Blue," "Shake Your Love," and "Foolish Beat" is on the market. It features a peek behind the scenes and a personal interview, as well. Besides that, there's a long-form video called *Debbie Gibson Live in Concert*.

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## Chapter Fourteen

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### The Future—Not *Only* in Her Dreams

She sits nervously in the audience, trying not to bite her nails, shifting uncomfortably in her seat. When the camera pans on her, she smiles brightly and hopes the knots in her stomach don't show on her face. And when the presenter's voice booms out, ". . . And the winner is . . . DEBBIE GIBSON!" she leaps from her seat, gives her teary mom and dad a bear hug, and makes a mad dash up to the podium. As Debbie Gibson wins her very first Grammy Award, she doesn't even try to contain her exuberance—she's joyful, radiant, and thankful, and she wants the whole world to know it!

That's the scene as Debbie might *imagine* it, anyway. Debbie's goal is actually not one, but three Grammy Awards, Best Artist, Best Songwriter, and Best Producer. As she admits, "It would be nice to pull a Michael Jackson and walk away with a shopping cart full of awards!" Is there any doubt Deb *will* one day pull it off? As Debbie dives headlong into the 1990s, she sees limitless possibilities, not all of which have to do with music.

Acting is a pursuit Debbie had to put on the back burner years ago to fully develop her music. Now that her musical career has taken off, she'd like to spend some time pursuing an

acting career. And there are people in the acting community who'd like to see her right up there. The groundwork for Debbie's film debut has already been laid. Back when Doug Breitbart was her manager, Debbie signed a multipicture contract with a major movie studio. She'll soon star in a movie called *Skirts*, about a wealthy young girl's adventures at the 1964 World's Fair. She'll be composing the sound track for *Skirts* too. There are many other kinds of movies Debbie could do, but there's little doubt as to the particular film prize she has her eyes on. Plans are in the works for a movie version of the spectacular play *Les Misérables*—that's the one Debbie tried out for but didn't get a part in. Now, she figures she'd be just about perfect for that same role of Eponine. And since the story of *Les Misérables* is told entirely in song, she does have something extra going for her.

Whether or not *Les Miz* pans out, Debbie's got something else up her sleeve: the do-it-yourself kid is actually putting the finishing touches on her *own* screenplay. "It's a teen movie with a twist," is all she'll say about it, but if she's writing it, you can bet it's totally hot.

Another place to see Debbie in the near future is on the TV screen, doing commercials for the brand-new perfume that bears the Electric Youth label.

Education is on Debbie's agenda as well, as this high school grad would very much like to go on to college. She probably won't take four years off to attend Vassar College, as her older sisters did, but she *is* exploring her options at closer-to-home Hofstra University. She's checking out a course of study in filmmaking and video production that would teach her all she needs to know about producing and editing videos.

There's more music to be made, and as Debbie matures, she expects her songs will reflect new experiences, new feelings. "I'm in this for the long run," she figures, and she plans to keep on composing, recording, making videos, and performing, just as long as people want to hear her. She's now upgraded her at-home studio to the point where she can record

her actual singles and LPs right at her new home; she'll no longer need to trek to another studio. Immediate plans include a live album, plus work on her third big studio effort. She'd also love to include a duet with her still-idol, Billy Joel.

Debbie Gibson's not the only person in her family to have begun to branch out. There's now an official Gibson Productions with a business office on Long Island. They not *only* handle Deb, but are gearing up to produce and represent other artists, as well. Debbie is more psyched than anyone at the thought of putting her talents to work for other musicians—she's got ideas aplenty about writing songs for other singers and sharing her musical gifts. Many family members are involved in Gibson Productions, including Diane Gibson and her sister, Linda Sanfilippo.

Speaking of family, Debbie's not without strong feelings—and especially dreams—on that subject, too. At an age when most young women are thinking about breaking, or at least loosening, those family ties that bind, Debbie's still very much attached to *hers*, both physically and emotionally. She lives with her parents and sister Denise at the Gibsons' brand-new home overlooking the waterfront and sees her sisters Karen and Michele frequently. Debbie has absolutely no plans to move out. "I'm not ready," she told *USA Today*. "Maybe because I'm away so much or with strangers so much, I like coming home to the family. Besides, I'm a mess! I don't know if I could take care of myself—I'm a terrible cook!"

Domestic or not, Debbie's dreams do include, one day, a home of her own—one she'd share, of course, with a very special young man. She hasn't a clue as to who he might be, but she'll know him when she finds him—or, rather, takes the time to find him. For all the time and energy she's put into her career in the past dozen years, sometimes she fantasizes about slowing down the pace just a bit and taking some time off so that possibly, a *real* romance might bloom. And maybe, she thinks, if a certain romance should turn out to be the real thing,

she knows exactly what she would do—and what she wouldn't. "I don't really believe in living with someone," she once said. "I kind of have old-fashioned values. When you want to marry someone, you know it." Debbie's role models are her mom and her sister Karen, both of whom married at relatively young ages—it could happen to Debbie that same way. She envisions a strong, stable marriage for herself, not unlike that of her own parents. Children are most definitely in the picture, too.

But those are the kinds of dreams, no matter how strongly she may feel about them, that will just have to wait. The reality is that there are only certain kinds of dreams that Debbie can *make* come true, and she's already gotten quite a head start on them. As Debbie herself says in "Electric Youth": "the future is electric youth!" And the most electric of them all is Debbie Gibson, America's very own rock 'n' roll sweetheart!

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## Chapter Fifteen

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## Debbie Data

**Real Full Name:** Deborah Ann Gibson

**Birth Date:** August 31, 1970

**Birthplace:** Brooklyn, New York

**Grew Up In:** North Merrick, Long Island, New York

**Height:** 5'6"

**Weight:** 114 lbs.

**Hair:** Blond

**Eyes:** Brown

**Family:** Parents, Diane and Joe Gibson. Sisters, Karen Behre, Michele, and Denise Gibson. Brother-in-law, Bill Behre.

**Nicknames:** Debbie Gibstone, Gibs, Dibs, Deb

**Pets:** Sam, a mixed breed, the family dog

**Lives Now In:** Suffolk County, Long Island

**Car:** Mint green 1950s Ford Fairlane convertible

**School:** Graduated from Sanford H. Calhoun High School, June 1988

### *FAVORITES*

**Sports and Hobbies:** Tennis and photography

**Rockers:** George Michael, Michael Jackson, Billy Joel, Whitney Houston

**Music:** Bubblegum pop rock

**Song:** Elton John's "Crocodile Rock"

**Food:** Lobster, pizza, french fries, and hamburgers

**Dessert:** Pecan pie

**Drink:** Diet soda

**Colors:** White, yellow, and blue

**TV Shows:** *Growing Pains*, *Family Ties*, *Who's the Boss?*,  
*The Cosby Show*, and *It's Garry Shandling's Show*

**Actors:** Kirk Cameron, Michael J. Fox, Molly Ringwald,  
Daryl Hannah

**Reads:** Magazines mostly, including *Billboard*, the record  
trade industry publication. Her favorite book is *What Makes  
Sammy Run?* by Budd Schulberg.

**Game:** Pictionary

**Travel:** Hawaii, Paris

**Clothes:** Jeans, oversize T-shirts, and funky jackets

**Accessories:** Watches, friendship bracelets, funky pins, big  
hoop earrings, hats

**Instruments:** Piano, guitar, drums, synthesizer

**Hangout:** Diners and shopping malls—but not on a Saturday  
afternoon, when she's likely to be mobbed!

**Ideal Guy:** Someone who's intelligent, creative, and fun

**Pet Peeves:** Being told she's too young to do something—  
being told she can't do something!

**Advice to Aspiring Pop Stars:** "Start young! When you're a  
teen, you don't have to worry about paying the rent. It's an  
easier time to struggle! Believe in what you're doing, be  
serious about it, don't take the attitude that you're only a  
kid. Treat the music like any musician would."

**Ultimate Fantasy:** Megastardom—as a musician and movie  
star, doing it *all* and sharing it all with a family of her own

Fan Club: D.G.I.F.,  
PO Box 489,  
Merrick, NY 11566

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## Chapter Sixteen

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### Debbie's Discography

*Out of the Blue*, Atlantic Records and Tapes, 1987

Side One

Out of the Blue  
Staying Together  
Only in My Dreams  
Foolish Beat  
Red Hot

Side Two

Wake Up to Love  
Shake Your Love  
Fallen Angel  
Play the Field  
Between the Lines

All songs written by Deborah Gibson

All lyrics copyright 1987 by Walden Music, ASCAP

Certified multiplatinum by the RIAA; sales in excess of three million copies

*Electric Youth*, Atlantic Records and Tapes, 1989

This Side

Who Loves Ya Baby?

Lost in Your Eyes  
Love in Disguise  
Helplessly in Love  
Silence Speaks (A Thousands Words)  
Should've Been the One

That Side

Electric Youth  
No More Rhyme  
Over the Wall  
We Could Be Together  
Shades of the Past

All songs written by Deborah Gibson

All songs copyright 1988 by Walden Music, ASCAP

Certified multiplatinum by the RIAA; sales in excess of three million copies

## VIDEOS

*Debbie Gibson Out of the Blue*, released August 1988

Certified gold by the RIAA; sales in excess of 25,000 units

*Debbie Gibson Live in Concert*, released February 1989

### **About the Author**

Randi Reisfeld is editorial director of *16* magazine, a youth-oriented entertainment publication. She has interviewed and written about hundreds of young celebrities. In addition, her work includes a biography of actor Johnny Depp, and her articles have appeared in *The New York Times*, Scholastic magazines, and *Women's World* magazine.

She resides in the New York area.

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